

Classical Writers.

Edited by JOHN RICHARD GREEN.

SOPHOCLES.

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'The primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be.

London :

MACMILLAN AND CO.

1879.

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LONDON ' PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO , NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER I.	
LIFE OF SOPHOCLES	7
CHAPTER II.	
ANTECEDENTS : RELIGIOUS	13
CHAPTER III.	
ANTECEDENTS : NATIONAL AND POLITICAL	19
CHAPTER IV.	
ANTECEDENTS : ETHICAL—THE AGE OF TRAGEDY	22
CHAPTER V.	
EXTERNAL CONDITIONS—CHOICE OF FABLE	33
CHAPTER VI.	
ARGUMENTS OF THE SEVEN EXISTANT PLAYS	41
CHAPTER VII.	
METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION—I. INVENTION; II. ARRANGEMENT.	57
CHAPTER VIII.	
MODE OF CONSTRUCTION CONTINUED—CONTRAST— CONTINUITY AND PERSPECTIVE—"UNITY OF TIME"—FREEDOM AND VARIETY	75

CHAPTER IX.

	PAGE
THE PERSONS—AJAX, ŒDIPUS, PHILOCTETES, NEOPTOLEMUS	89

CHAPTER X.

THE PERSONS—ANTIGONE, ELECTRA, DEIANIRA	102
---	-----

CHAPTER XI.

THE PERSONS—HERACLES—HYLLUS ; ORESTES—ÆGISTHUS ; CREON—TEIRESIAS—HÆMON ; ODYSSEUS—TEUCER—AGAMEMNON—MENELAUS, THESEUS	110
--	-----

CHAPTER XII.

THE PERSONS.—TECMESSA—JOCASTA—ISMENE—CHRY-SOTHEMIS—CLYTEMNESTRA—EURYDICE—MINOR CHARACTERS	118
---	-----

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHORUS	127
----------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIV.

POETIC FORM	134
-----------------------	-----

CHAPTER XV.

FRAGMENTS FROM LOST PLAYS	141
-------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVI.

TRANSLATIONS	146
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVII.

ÆSCHYLUS—SOPHOCLES—EURIPIDES—SHAKESPEARE	151
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INTRODUCTION.

Difficulties of the Drama.—The perusal of dramatic works is attended with difficulties of a special kind. Epic poetry abounds with aids to the imagination. Situations are described, characters indicated, motives explained. Although the early epics were meant to be recited and not read, the only serious demand they make upon a reader is that of continuous attention. And if it sometimes requires an effort to realise the drift of lyric poetry, yet, when the single mood of feeling which has prompted the poet is once caught, he is sure to make himself understood, even though his words are no longer sung. But Drama, as the most concentrated and concrete form of imaginative creation, can never be fully presented in writing or in print; and few readers can even dimly picture to themselves the effect which would be produced on a fit audience by the right performance either of single scenes or of a whole play.

This, which is true of all dramatic writing, is pre-eminently applicable to those masterpieces of tragedy which, symbolising as they do each of them some comprehensive aspect of human life, must indeed “be acted ere they may be scanned.”

Intelligent study may, however, to some extent supply the want of representation; and the purpose of this little book is to afford some assistance towards a just appreciation of the remaining works of Sophocles, who is certainly the most perfect of the world’s tragic writers, although he is surpassed in grandeur by his predecessor Æschylus, and by our own Shakespeare in expansiveness and fulness.

Special difficulties of Sophocles.—We cannot hope to appreciate any ancient writer until we have placed ourselves at his point of view, and understood the circumstances and the general aim of his endeavour. Sophocles is indeed so human, so penetrated with the great primary emotions and universal experience of the race, that he may find a sympathetic audience even amongst those who have given but little attention to his surroundings, just as, without technical preparation, one who has an eye for beauty may admire the Venus of Melos, or the Sistine Madonna. But for one person who receives the entire impress of a play of Sophocles at the first glance there are very many, by no means incapable of understanding him, who pass him by with a disappointed feeling that what is so smooth and finished cannot be otherwise than cold, and who contrast this superficial glimpse of a great poet with the instantaneous thrill which overpowered them at the first reading of the Cassandra scene in the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus, or the passionate speeches of Medea in Euripides.

Still more must anyone, in passing from the study of Shakespeare to that of ancient tragedy, be warned that he is entering upon a different sphere of art. Our English dramatist, when at his best, has indeed, like all great artists, a glorious simplicity of intention, but in his execution there is hardly any limit to the range and complexity of his modes of expression. In ancient tragedy, on the other hand, the whole work is far more completely dominated by a single tone. What complexity there is, is held firmly within the limits of a conscious harmony. It does not follow from this that Sophocles is monotonous. His art is no less characterised by freedom and variety than by harmonious unity.

SOPHOCLES.

CHAPTER I.

LIFE OF SOPHOCLES.

THE creations of a great tragic writer are but remotely connected with the events of his life. What is sometimes asserted of all poets is especially true of him, that his circumstances, even when thoroughly known, throw but a faint and distant light upon his writings. For the dramatist, even more than the epic poet, points us away from his individual being ; and tragedy is a result out of all proportion to the external influences, even could we know them perfectly, which were operative on the author's mind. Intense participation in a great cause, as in Dante and Milton, may assist creative imagination in some forms, but such preoccupations are but little favourable to purely dramatic art. And if the tragic genius is once present in its fulness, every life contains enough of sadness to give it ample food. The tragic artist could not himself have told us whence this or that portraiture was drawn. The data of personal experience are transmuted by him far more completely than by the subjective lyric poet. Hence it is more important, if not more interesting, to know particulars of the life of Sappho or of Shelley than of Sophocles or Shakespeare. Of that of Sophocles we know very little.

1. **Early life and training** — He is said to have been about fifteen at the time of the battle of Salamis, when he was chosen, on account of his beauty and his skill in music, to lead a choral procession in honour

of the victory. He had been trained in the school of Lamprus, the famous musician of Athens. This is all that is told us of his education in the narrower sense. It includes more than may appear at first sight; for music was the chief means of culture for Greek youth, and led to an intimate knowledge of the earlier poetry.

But his real education, and the chief interest of his life always, must have centred in the drama. At what precise moment he was initiated amongst the company of Dionysiac votaries (the dramatic guild, or *θιασός*), we can never know, but long before he had himself produced a tragedy we must imagine him as fired by the genius of Æschylus, and drinking in the harmonies of Phrynichus, as well as of Simonides and "Homer." And the crisis of his existence which has most interest for us, is his triumph over Æschylus, in B.C. 468, the twenty-seventh year of his age, by the award of Cimon and the other generals, to whom the judges delegated their powers, at the Lenæan (or Spring Dionysiac) festival. The dramatic training, of which this was the culminating point, was in the highest sense of a practical kind. His voice is said to have disqualified him from acting, except in silent parts; but there is little doubt that he exercised the closest supervision over the performances of his own plays, and that, like Æschylus, like Shakespeare, like Molière, he was personally conversant with the details of dramatic representation.

2. He was a native of the suburban district of Colonus, and his father is said to have been in a good position, and to have made money by superintending the manufacture of cutlery. The former statement at least is confirmed by the appointments which Sophocles held in public life, apparently without having earned them by special qualifications.

Middle life.—We are told that he was sent on various embassies, and it is affirmed by constant tradition that he held command with Pericles in the war with Samos, B.C. 441 or 440, being then fifty-five years old. The chief interest of both these facts, if

we may call them so, is the varied experience which would result from such employment, the contact with foreign cities, especially in Ionia, and the opportunities for personal observation elsewhere than at Athens which it must have involved. On one of these occasions he is supposed to have made the acquaintance of Herodotus, and an epigram attributed to Sophocles, but of doubtful authenticity, purports to record their intimacy. A contemporary tragic poet, Ion of Chios (the same who spoke of Pericles as dry and surly), made some notes of his fugitive intercourse with Sophocles, of which a few scraps have been preserved. In his public capacity Sophocles did not strike his brother artist as at all remarkable. "He was like any other respectable Athenian." But in society his urbanity, readiness and sprightliness seem to have charmed the facile Ionians with whom he found himself. He made no pretensions to generalship, and repeated with relish what Pericles had said of him, that he succeeded better as a poet than as a commander.*

3. These slight and casual impressions are all that remain to us of the person of Sophocles in his prime, unless, indeed, we may trust as authentic the beautiful statue of him now in the Lateran Museum at Rome, in which the first glance may show us only a statesman or general of handsome presence but moderate calibre, "like any other respectable Athenian"; but as we continue gazing on the harmonious figure, a grave and sympathetic humanity is seen to breathe from every line.

4. So much appears certain: that the man whom we know to have fully measured the height and depth of happiness and misery was sensitive to the touch of lighter joys, and counted "nothing human alien to him"; that he lived the life of a well-born Athenian of his time, not shrinking from public services, though not shining in them; and that he was gifted with all

* In listening to Ion's light gossip it is well to bear in mind Plutarch's caution in repeating his remarks on Pericles: "Life seemed insipid to him without the satyr-element."

the versatile graces of which Pericles boasts in his countrymen, passing through rough and smooth hours imperturbably, and indulging perhaps somewhat freely in pleasure unproved.*

5. And to set off against the description of his gayer moments (men like Ion were not witnesses of his graver moods), we have the authority of Plato for a story of his later years, which in an interesting manner reflects to us the sober colouring of

“ an eye
That hath kept watch o’er man’s mortality.”

To one who rallied him on having outlived the pleasures of love, he said, with something of severity, “Nay, but in escaping from that I have left the tyrannical service of a mad master.” (Cp. *Ant.* 781 foll., *Trach.* 441 foll.)

6. His old age was spent at Athens, perhaps in Colonus, his native district, whose *flora* he has immortalised as Shakespeare has done that of Stratford. (Had Sophocles a “New Place” by the Cephissus?)

The poet was eighty-two years old when the precinct of Poseidon at Colonus was made the scene of the oligarchical revolution of the Four Hundred, by which, in the spring of B.C. 411, Athenian democracy was temporarily suppressed. As one of the older generation, whose natural tendency was to blame the demagogues for the disasters of the State, he may, in common with other persons of weight, have hoped some public benefit from this change, and the name of “Sophocles” occurs amongst those of the ten *probuli*, or special counsellors, who had been appointed after the Syracusan calamity to provide that the commonwealth should take no harm; in Roman language, “ne quid respublica detrimenti acciperet.” It may well have been that Antiphon, Pisander and their as-

* Not wholly so, if we may really credit Pericles with the fine warning, “A commander must not only have clean hands, but an irreproachable eye.”

sociates may have reasoned of him as Metellus Cimber does of Cicero in *Julius Cæsar* :—

“O, let us have him, for his silver hairs
Will purchase us a good opinion
And buy men’s voices to commend our deeds,”

or as Casca says of Brutus :—

“Oh, he sits high in all the people’s hearts,
And that which would appear offence in us,
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and to worthiness.”

7. Whether this were so or not, it is manifest that he had no lasting quarrel with the majority of his countrymen, who continued to honour him while they delighted in Euripides; and we have the witness of Aristophanes to the impression which the serenity of his last years had made upon them: as of one not striving for mastery, but sure to live peaceably “where-some’er he is,”* in the other world as in this. He had a son, Iophon, and a grandson, Sophocles. Iophon was a tragic poet in his father’s lifetime, and Sophocles is said to have edited the *Œdipus Coloneus* after the author’s death. It is hardly worth while to allude to stories of still more questionable authenticity, such as the conflicting legends about the death of Sophocles, who seems to have attained the age of ninety, or the honours paid by Lysander to his tomb; but a saying attributed to him by Aristotle is worth repeating, as at least well invented if not authentic:—“I make men as they ought to be, Euripides men as they are,” a compliment which the realism of the later poet was hardly substantial enough to deserve.

These scanty vestiges of biography are such as a sober criticism will for the most part neither wholly accept nor wholly deny. But were they altogether to vanish into air, the central fact which is of chief significance would remain—that Sophocles was an Athenian of the age of Pericles, and a tragic poet—the author, amongst other works, of the *Antigone*.

* Shak. *Hen. V.* ii. 3.

The contemporary comic poet, Phrynichus, described him, after his death, in lines which may be freely rendered thus :—

“ The happy child of sad Melpomene,
To whom long life brought no calamity.
To crown his works Genius and Fortune blend,
And Death has sealed them with a peaceful end.”

CHAPTER II.

ANTECEDENTS : RELIGIOUS.

THE rise of Tragedy in connection with the Dionysiac festivals has been clearly described by Professor Jebb in his *Primer of Greek Literature*. All that is here necessary is to allude in general terms to the religious influences under which the art grew up, and the religious associations which clung to it, and then pass on to the consideration of other elements of thought and feeling which were no less essential to its life.

Tragedy has been regarded as the meeting-point of Dorian lyric poetry and the Ionian epos upon Attic soil. But this is not a complete account of its origin. That which had the power to fuse these divers elements, and combine them into a new whole, the red blood which animated this new creature, was the orgiastic impulse of a peculiar form of Nature-worship, which, according to Herodotus, was not indigenous to Hellas, but had been imported from the east. The worship of Bacchus or Dionysus had come into Attica by way of Eleutheræ from Thebes, and had been fused with other mystic rites, especially those of the Eleusinian Demeter.

Nature-worship and the drama.—Few mental phenomena are more difficult to grasp, while none is more certain, than the union of sport with seriousness, the mingled sadness and gaiety, with which men in early times expressed their reverence for Nature. Some interesting traces of this may be found in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, where the tone of festive

gladness blends with the native melancholy of the theme in a most delicate harmony. An analogous combination was present in the more robust and somewhat coarser ritual of Dionysus. And, as the waking-dream which haunts the play-time of a gifted child reflects the colours of reality, so that his likings and aversions, the habits of his daily round, his tasks and penalties, his simple but awe-stricken imaginations of worlds beyond his own, are mirrored in the prompt imaginings to which "the little actor frames his part," so the worshipper of Iacchus, exhilarated at once and awed in representing to himself the sufferings of the god, threw more and more of human experience into the work.

Thus winning an outlet for itself, and claiming all things for its food, the strong imaginative tendency acquired new forces.

I. And, first, **tragedy proper became differentiated from the satyr-drama.**

The springs of joy and grief lay near together in the orgiastic ecstasy, and, at first, what we should call tragic and comic elements were confused. But some exceptional spirit, touched to finer issues than the rest, and finding a peculiar charm in the tones which expressed human struggle and sorrow, desired to have them freed from the grosser elements, and varied from the conventional limitations that threatened to choke their music. From such beginnings we may imagine the tragic poet to have gradually become conscious of his peculiar function—that of stirring and soothing men by idealising for them the sadness of human life.

"I come no more to make you laugh ; things now
That bear a weighty and a serious brow,
Sad, high and working, full of state and woe,
Such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow,
We now present ; those that can pity, here
May, if they think it well, let fall a tear :
The subject will deserve it."

Yet the vein of rustic *navvété* was not wholly

eliminated, but peeps forth at rare intervals even in Sophocles, reminding us of the deep saying of Socrates, that it belongs to the same genius to produce tragedy and comedy.

II. While thus becoming specialised, and putting on its proper form, **the tragic spirit also gained in comprehensiveness.** There was a Protean, adventurous, prehensile element in the Bacchic worship that predisposed it to acknowledge kindred with other rites. It could neither be stationary nor isolated, least of all in the liberal Athenian air. That the Eleutherian Dionysus should become associated with the mystic influence of the Eleusinian Demeter, or with the wild impulsiveness of Pan; that in his graver aspect he should conciliate to himself the jealous Furies, and, as the lord of nightly exaltation, even claim affinity with the powers of Death, was natural if not inevitable. But in tragedy as we know it, the original religious element has attained a much wider catholicity, and without losing either in spontaneity or in mystic depth, displays itself in the full daylight of the national religion. Zeus, Athena and Apollo, Hermes and Artemis, appear for the most part in full accord with the Spirits of Earth and Darkness. Only, through their contact with tragedy, **the mystic attributes of the Olympians** are deepened and intensified. Zeus as the Judge, Apollo as the Seer, Hermes as the Guardian of the Dead, preside fitly over the development of tragic themes. And now and then a note of dissidence is heard, and the seen and unseen worlds, the Gods of Glory and of Gloom, are for the moment opposed. (*Æsch. Ag.* 636 foll., *Soph. Ant.* 777-80.)

Of the hundred and more religious functionaries, male and female, who occupied the front rows in the Dionysiac theatre, not one could fail to hear from time to time some reference to the deity whom he served; though the priests of Apollo, of Artemis, and of Nemesis (probably a late comer) might feel at tragic representations a peculiar sympathy with the priest of

Dionysus Eleuthereus, who occupied the central chair.*

The same enlargement of the original scope of Bacchic song appeared also in the variation of the subject. The sorrows of Dionysus could not always be the vehicle of expression. As the people of Sicyon had found the calamities of Adrastus, their native hero, a more congenial theme for tragic choruses, so we can readily understand how an Athenian concourse might often prefer to have their feelings moved by a scene from the life of Theseus or of Erechtheus.

III And the utterance of emotion at the Dionysiac festival, while thus becoming more catholic and more national, **became also more essentially dramatic.** This was the only form of early religious feeling which had either force or freedom enough to call for downright impersonation and to make it possible.

The Eastern story-teller sits in the midst of a circle of enchained listeners in his ordinary garb. He may often suit his gestures to his words, and mimic looks and tones. But the imagination of the listeners is satisfied without his directly representing those of whom he tells his tale.

Seat the epic rhapsodist on a throne above his audience, with a wand to beat time to the measured cadence of his recitative, and he will charm the placid Ionian multitude through a summer's day. They do not ask that the heroes should step forth from the stately framework of the narrative.

Arion puts on his robe of inspiration and tunes his lyre, and he is at once divine, and the rough Corinthian sailor forgets his toil and his rapacious greed in listening to him. His hearers become responsive to every variation in his strain ; but they do not as yet demand to see an actual concrete embodiment of what so moves them.

* It is a noticeable fact, though, as several of the seats are lost, it may be accidental, that Ares the Destroyer, and Aphrodite the Goddess of Love, are not named in any of the places at present marked in the Dionysiac theatre.

It was only when feeling had been raised to an extraordinary pitch through the excitement of choric song and the imagined presence of Dionysus at his feast, that there came the passion for impersonation, the desire for immediate vision (*ἔποψις*) of the acts and objects about which emotion had become transcendent. Hence came the power that wove together the pre-existing elements of Greek poetry and art into a new creation, having an intense life, a novel charm and fascination, of its own.

The fact that the lyric element in tragedy was prior to the dramatic—that the actors were originally members of a chorus—shows that the drama took its rise, not from the mere love of imitation, or from the habit of recitation, but from the imperative need for expression.

Sophocles and the religious aspect of the drama.—In Sophocles tragedy has long since broadened from its source, and the strictly religious motive is veiled under the free handling of triumphant art. Hardly any of his subjects are taken immediately from the Dionysiac legend. The gods seldom come upon the scene, and their several attributes are less distinct than in Æschylus. Their absolute control of human things appears indirectly. They work through the passions of men. But the Bacchic fire still springs forth unbidden. The thought of Dionysus is ever at hand, especially in connection with Thebes. And while Zeus is absolute, and the predominance under him of Athena in the *Ajax*, and of Apollo in several plays, is clearly acknowledged, the poet's sympathy for the mystic side of all religion, his reverence for the powers of the under-world—that longing for things unseen, and for the revelation of eternal truths, which the Eleusinian worship had encouraged—has a deeper and more pervading influence upon his work.

The religious elements that are most persistent in Sophoclean tragedy are—

1. The association of religion with the sanctities of domestic life. In this the powers of Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Artemis, Demeter, and the Erinyes are combined.

2. The recognition of Athena as the special protectress of cities.

3. The religious duty of protecting the stranger and the suppliant.

4. The importance of funeral rites.

5. The close relation of the Divine working to the course of individual lives.

6. The tendency, which is most apparent in the latest dramas, insensibly to substitute the inward for the outward, the moral for the positive, in religious obligation.*

* The cry of Hyllus at the end of the *Trachiniae*, and the complaint of Philoctetes on hearing of the death of Antilochus, are the chief expressions in Sophocles of the new feeling of perplexity about the gods, which so largely affects the work of Euripides. See also *Fragm.* 649 (*Dind.*).

CHAPTER III.

ANTECEDENTS : NATIONAL AND POLITICAL.

Athens and the drama.—By a coincidence fruitful in results, the worship of the Theban Dionysus had been carried from Eleutheræ to Athens, and had taken firm root in the affections of the people, before the grand awakening of national life which had its triumph in the Persian War. Without the reforms of Cleisthenes, without Marathon, Attic tragedy would have existed, but could never have attained perfection. The same causes which made the Parthenon excel the temple of Theseus, wrought still more powerfully in giving undying significance to the works of Æschylus and Sophocles. The art in which a nation takes delight and pride at the moment when its own life is culminating, has a supreme chance of reaching its own highest form ; and the drama, being a thing dependent upon “public means” (χορηγίας δεόμενον), could not have grown at all, had not this service been willingly undertaken as a public burden (λειτουργία). The Pisistratidæ, indeed, might have undertaken this for their own glory. But in the succeeding age this liberality on the part of wealthier men was but the outward sign of the spontaneous universal interest. The audience of Æschylus and Sophocles were in fact the Athenian citizens *en masse*, assembled in the spirit of Dionysus at moments of high solemnity, and finding in his observance an outlet for profound emotions which stirred them individually and socially. They were a people who had lately learned that political freedom is an excellent

thing, but knew not yet all that it meant, or into what struggles and dangers it might hereafter carry them ; a people who had learned and had taught mankind that national independence is a thing worth fighting for, but had too weak a hold of the other lesson which they had also taught by their example, that the federation of free peoples is nobler than any form of tyranny ; a people with glorious memories and boundless possibilities, but surrounded with unknown dangers. This people gave their whole attention to tragic performances for days together, year after year. Was there ever such an opportunity? And never was great opportunity more grandly met.

True relation of the drama to national life.—We are not to suppose, however, that it could be the business of tragedy to become the direct exponent of the national consciousness, and to teach or preach political and social truth. That would be to misconceive the relation in which art stands to the events of history. The Tragic Muse gave a passing tribute to the mighty movements that were lifting her to higher levels and into a wider sphere ; as when Phrynichus in his *Phœnissæ*, or Æschylus in the *Persæ*, chose to celebrate the repulse of Xerxes. But, as Phrynichus found upon another occasion, when he made a drama of the taking of Miletus, the people did not want to be reminded of their own recent joys or sorrows, but to forget the present in the contemplation of things imaginary or remote. The true home of tragedy was the ideal ; or rather was to be sought in those early legends where primitive experience was mirrored in traditional belief. In moulding these to his purpose the tragedian fused them with what he felt to be most precious in the spirit of his own age, whether he regarded the old heroic tale as the record of a struggle towards principles which now ruled mankind, or as typifying the eternal laws which in all ages equally must be the light of men. If, in treating the legend of Orestes, Æschylus made particular reference to the Court of the Areopagus ; or if, in the *Œdipus*

Coloneus, Sophocles glanced at the relations of Athens to Thebes, and perhaps also at home politics, these were exceptional divergences from the main direction of their art. And yet, indirectly, it is conceivable that the *Antigone* reflects the feeling of a time when there seemed to be a danger of the "rule of the first citizen" becoming too despotic, and that the pathos of the *Œdipus Tyrannus* may have been deepened for some of those who saw it by the remembrance of the popular ruler, whose meridian glory was eclipsed by family troubles, who was of the accursed family, whose children had been declared illegitimate under the law which he himself had made, and who was cut off by the plague.*

The true national significance of Greek tragedy, however,—a chief cause of that vital reality in which it is pre-eminent—lies not in contemporary allusions, but in the broad fact that it is instinct with the beliefs, the memories, the aspirations, the moral convictions of the Athenian people, when in the full tide of their career; and also that its greatest works were produced while the pride of Athens was still consistent with the hope of Hellenic unity—a hope to which the dramatist, both as poet and as votary of Dionysus, still clung, even when its knell had been sounded in the triumph of Sparta. For it is to be observed that the worshippers of Zeus, of Apollo, of Hera and Artemis, of Dionysus and Demeter, were members of a communion that extended far beyond their party or their city; and this, in Athens at least, must have combined with other humanising influences, to cherish Pan-Hellenic sentiment. Religion helped to counteract the narrowing effects of national and political bias.

* These statements about Pericles are taken from Plutarch's *Life*.

CHAPTER IV.

ANTECEDENTS: ETHICAL—THE AGE OF TRAGEDY.

JONSON's often-quoted eulogy on Shakespeare, "He was not of an age, but for all time," is in one sense true of all great tragedy, which is assured of permanence, because it springs from universal human nature. But tragedy is also the birth of a particular time. It is a plant that seldom flowers, and requires the concurrence of many causes for its full development. Many races have had the rudiments of the drama, and in several these have reached a certain maturity. But the great tragedies of the world are very few, and the nations which have produced them have done so only at one stage of their career.

I. Before describing the ethical antecedents of the work of Sophocles, it may be permissible here to interpose a few general remarks upon a point which is liable to misconception—the **aim of tragedy**.

1. The primary aim of tragedy is to excite universal sympathy for an ideal sorrow, and to give expression and relief to human emotion. In a great community there is a mass of grief and care which in the common daylight of the market-place and the assembly is conveniently ignored. Thus each heart is left to a knowledge of its own bitterness, and pines in isolation. But when men are drawn together to a spectacle of imagined woe, placed vividly before the faithful witness of the eye, the fountain of tears within them is unlocked, and society

of grief is gained without confession. Feeling is at once consoled by communion, and sheltered in the privacy of a crowd. For all who have any depth in them, however habitually light-hearted, such an occasional overflow is tranquillising, while those whose burden presses heavily are eased and comforted. They are rapt from the narrow contemplation of their own destiny into a world where all private trouble is annihilated, and yet is typified so as to give an excuse for tears.

Considered so far, the want to which tragedy ministers is not the craving for excitement but the need for expression.

2. A direct result of tragic representation is the enlargement of sympathy. The poet sets before the spectators a life different from and yet akin to theirs, which, however strange to them, powerfully stirs their hearts. Consider the effect of this, not on an individual reader, but on a dense assemblage of spectators. Will not each of them experience a fulness and refinement of sympathy with every other, for which their ordinary work and striving gives little room? The hero of the piece may be their own countryman. Then their individual interests are lost in patriotism. Or he may be not their countryman. Then they are lifted into a wider region of Pan-Hellenic or of purely human feeling.

3. But it must not be forgotten that besides the pathetic and ethical, tragedy has also an intellectual motive. This is well expressed by Milton in his *Common-place Book*. It was, indeed, the aspect of this form of poetry which most clearly presented itself to him. His words are:—"Quid enim in totâ philosophiâ aut gravius aut sanctius aut sublimius tragediâ rectè constitutâ, quid utilius ad humanæ vitæ casus et conversiones uno intuitu spectandos?" "Is there in all philosophy a thing more dignified, more holy, or more lofty, than well-ordered tragedy;—more effective for the concentrated contemplation of the catastrophes and revolutions of human life?"

Tragedy is here viewed as the representation of

the whole of life in a typical example, and the tragic artist as one who can sum up the lessons of human vicissitude through the delineation of a particular crisis. And this, although hardly involved in the primary motive of tragedy, has certainly proved inseparable from the art in its most perfect realisations. The greatest tragic artists have been those "who saw life steadily and saw it whole," and the finest tragedies are those in which the interest is most comprehensive and universal.

We are thus led to expand the definition with which we began, and to say that the "aim of tragedy" is to **express and call forth a collective sympathy with ideal sorrow, and thus, while relieving and enlarging the heart, and refining and elevating its emotions, to infix and deepen the truths of human experience.** We are also led to observe that the emotion called forth by tragedy is not adequately described, as in the old formula, by the words "pity" and "fear." There is another class of feelings, more nearly allied to intellect, which are not less appealed to. These may be roughly indicated as "wonder and awe," and are awakened in those who are led to the brink of some great mystery.

4. The definition thus modified may be too narrow to include all that deserves the name of tragedy, but it is also widened so as to apply to pieces like the *Eumenides*, *Philoctetes*, *Alcestis*, and others that in the common phrase "end happily." For while no work can typify the whole of life that does not include the struggle with evil, the mind that enters fully into the depths of sorrow is alone competent to test the reality of joy.

5. The question has been debated, sometimes with acrimony, whether the tragic poet is necessarily a moral teacher. In answering this question in the affirmative, it is by no means meant that the author is to be judged by the maxims, wise or unwise, which in the mouths of his *dramatis personæ* serve to point the

contrasts of character, and to bring the imaginary action into relation with the habitual thoughts of the spectators. It is not meant that Euripides is immoral because Hippolytus says, "The tongue hath sworn to this, not so the mind," or Sophocles moral, because Antigone says, "Love and not hatred is the guide for me." Wholly apart from such trifling there is a true sense in which tragedy must teach a moral lesson. For otherwise it could not stir the heart or satisfy the imagination of a multitude. It presupposes both in author and spectator an intense interest in the life and destiny of man. It seeks to exhibit these in a condensed example, not partially or superficially, but as they are seriously regarded in some one of their most important aspects. This is what the Greeks meant by saying that tragedy is "serious representation," *σπουδαία μίμησις*.

Mere blind, unreflecting passion can never by itself be an adequate subject for tragic treatment before rational men. The unconsciousness of tragic persons has the effect of pathos only when our imagination contemplates it by the light of reason. The poet in displaying the situation must somehow make felt what he conceives to be its true nature. This may be done either, as in the *Medea* and *Macbeth*, by exhibiting flashes of the higher spirit in the person who is enthralled to the lower, or by means of contrasts (like that between Macbeth and Banquo), or through an ideal spectator (such as Ross and Lennox), or by some other means. But it must be done. Unless the tragic poet is in earnest in his representation of life he must fail of the highest success; and if he is in earnest, he will, with more or less of consciousness, impress on his audience his own general view of life; in other words, his moral ideal. And this will not be lastingly impressive unless it is true. He will make the action appear to the spectators, as it would have appeared in reality to a considerate observer, who, while profoundly sympathising with the difficulties and weaknesses of noble human beings, could also

meditate on the causes and results of action. Indeed these cannot be altogether hidden from the persons on the stage. It is in moments of struggle and difficulty that moral reflection becomes most active, and moral principles acquire supreme importance. And that can hardly be a satisfying work of art, or fitted to command wide interest, which represents persons who are to seem worthy of sympathy as at such moments totally indifferent to morality. Still less can the poet or the spectator be carried out of the sphere of right. For tragedy is at once individual and universal: individual, because the persons act from motives resulting from their characters and situations, and believed as real: universal, because their lives are regarded as typifying the whole of human destiny.

Tragedy is sure to reflect the deepest morality of the age in which it lives. And this, in regard to ethical reflection, is most likely to be an age of growth or transition. A rude or frivolous period can have no tragedy; a "reasoned" philosophy of life, perhaps, would leave no room for it. It seems to flourish most when the collective interest in life is greatest, and reflection at the same time most ardent, but not yet mature. The inexhaustible moral wisdom that combined with the art of Shakespeare in creating *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Othello*, affords the more astonishing proof of what has been said, because these plays were produced, not for solemn exhibition at an annual religious festival, but simply to please an audience who came night after night to "see away their shilling."

It is possible to hold this truth, and yet to affirm the distinction between two kinds of tragic artist, one possessed, like *Æschylus*, with the consciousness of a moral and religious mission, and inspired with principles which directly inform his work; the other before all else an artist, who, notwithstanding, conveys deep lessons; because, without doing so, he must come short of the legitimate effect of his art.

II. The ethical ideas of the age which pre-

ceded Sophocles are mirrored for us in the pages of Herodotus. The deep moral feeling which prompts such warnings as that of the oracle to Glaucus, when tempted to commit perjury—"The Oath has a nameless child that wreaks destruction"—appears there side by side with a strong vein of fatalism and pessimism.

1. No man can escape his destiny. The course of every life is predetermined; and though a god may sometimes obtain a boon of the Fates (as the Delphic Oracle professed that Phœbus had done in the case of Croesus), their decrees, even if thus delayed, are not less ultimately sure.

2. Malignity is an essential attribute of the divine nature. God is envious of human prosperity, and uplifts men only to cast them down. This doctrine was at first intended as a corrective of the natural presumption of the fortunate man; but was also the expression of profound bitterness and disappointment, as the story of Mycerinus shows.

3. The same spirit of sadness is expressed in the words of Artabanus to Xerxes, who had wept over the mortality of his great army: "Not one of these whom thou beholdest but will often think it better for himself to die than to live. The sweetness of life once tasted, the cruel hand of God is presently felt."

A sense of the misery and ephemeral shortness of human life had been growing up in Ionia for centuries with the growth of luxury under the impending shadow of Eastern despotisms. It finds utterance even in Homer, and is the characteristic note of the pleasure-loving Mimmernus. The last word of the earlier Ionian philosophy was the sad word "Change."

The same dark view of life had been expressed in other parts of Hellas. Thus Theognis of Megara had sung:—

"Far best is never to be born; next best by far, to die."

It is obvious that in all this there is a strain of thought and sentiment that prepares a fitting soil for tragedy. And the reader of Sophocles will often be

reminded that the "Greek serenity" did not exclude the indulgence of this melancholy humour. But tragedy is neither the product nor the cause of moral languor, nor of the spirit that questions whether life be after all worth living. The pessimist definition of the art as one whose purpose is to detach the spectator from the will to live, however applicable to the *Hercules Furens* or to *Hernani*, bears no relation to the *Prometheus* or the *Antigone*. These works are the expressions of an age of hopeful energy, and have the effect of deepening the conviction that liberty, affection, truth, are realities that make life, indeed, "worth living." Tragedy did not spring up in Ionia, but in Attica. Its authors were not "great souls despising the affairs of little states," but children of a queenly city in whose destiny their own was merged. It was the fulness of the life surrounding them, the imminent birth of a transcendent future, the unfamiliar vision of an ampler world, that roused them to probe the mystery of human existence, which thus assumed new aspects, and to recast the wild imaginings of former ages. The dark tradition of an inevitable fate, of a curse pursuing many generations, of the caprice and envy of the gods, were received by them, but in no unquestioning spirit. Not that they state questions; for their business was not to make men think but feel. But while repeating ancient saws about fatality and envy, they do not leave them unmodified. And largely as these traditional notions enter into the works of *Æschylus* and *Sophocles*, inseparable as they were from the legends which they handled, they have not the chief emphasis: we are not made to feel that they had the first place in the poet's thoughts. In *Æschylus* they are met by another set of ideas, at once more original and more inspiring, such as the supremacy of Justice, and the evolution of Order out of Disorder.

1. In *Herodotus*, as we have seen, the belief in righteousness appears in the crude form of *Nemesis*, and of the certainty of retribution, especially when

wrong is accompanied with perjury. But this falls infinitely short of the Æschylean vision of equity and moral purity. The views of Æschylus are still simple, and still encrusted with traditions that are inconsistent with them. But like the Hebrew prophets, whom he resembles more than any other Greek, his inconsequent and rugged speech has inexhaustible meaning: while society exists, his profound feeling of the sacredness of the family hearth, his delineations of manliness, tenderness, and purity, of firm integrity and priceless self-devotion, must retain their value.

2. Not less interesting, and equally his own, is his view of these high things as a goal not yet attained, a progress not consummated. The righting of wrong is with him an eternal process rather than the revelation of the eternal fact. The divine justice in which he believes is the outcome of a never-ending struggle. Even the will of Zeus, which he regards as now identical with justice, is not believed by him to have been always at one with benevolence and wisdom. The moral cosmos is preceded by a moral chaos, out of which it grows.

This mental attitude is already typical of the place held by tragedy in the development of ethical reflection: a position intermediate between the dicta of early experience dashed with superstition, and the speculations of philosophy; and significant of a struggle of the human spirit at once with traditional shadows and with the more substantial problems of life.

III. Ethical ideas of Sophocles.—In Sophocles also the sense of divine justice is one of the inspiring notes of tragedy. With him it is already a tradition, but a tradition that has a living power. His manner of regarding the divine order is, however, different from that which characterised Æschylus. According to him, Right is all the while supreme, only men are unconscious of it, whence comes the sadness of their lives. And Fate, which still provides the framework and background of his tragedies,

is to him but another word for the unknown incalculable element of "our little life." Yet amidst the darkness which surrounds the human lot, Sophocles is possessed by the conviction that obedience to the "eternal laws" of equity, piety, and mercy contains the assurance of blessedness, and that no lasting harm can happen to the noble soul that holds fast its integrity.

The ethical worth of Sophocles is well summed up in Mr. Matthew Arnold's description of him as the man "who saw life steadily and saw it whole." He is not, like Æschylus, a prophet possessed with visions of high truths, which he sets forth in acted parables adapted to an almost childlike imagination, but a poet expressing to an audience of considerate men what he and they alike recognise as truths that

" in manhood darkly join,
Deep-seated in our mystic flame."

He accepts with unqualified reverence the traditionary religious basis as handed down to him. The sovereignty of Zeus, the omniscience of Apollo, the continuance of life in Hades, the blessedness of the initiated ; and again, the dreadful power of Fate and of the doom that has once gone forth,—all these are objects of his sincere belief and reverence, and enter as living elements into the fabric of his art, for they were constituent elements of the life that he knew. But that which dominates all else, the vital force which gives character and harmony to his work, is his intense interest in human life as such ; his contemplation and portrayal of man as man.

1. In the Periclean age, reflecting persons for the first time formed a clear conception of Human Nature. It is his firm grasp of this idea from the intellectual side that above all else gives permanent value to the work of Thucydides. The same thought is not less clearly apprehended by Sophocles in the form of feeling, although in his mind it is never dissociated from the recognition of powers above humanity, of "a divinity that shapes our ends." Less speculative than Æschylus,

less sceptical than Euripides, he acknowledges in each event a revelation of the divine will, which he regards as just even when inscrutable. But his strongest lights are thrown upon the human figures themselves, which appear out of the darkness and go into darkness again. So far as this can be achieved by art, the predestined catastrophe is brought about by the natural effect of circumstances on character, according to the saying of Heraclitus in the previous century, "Man's character is his destiny." The gods are for the most part withdrawn to their unseen Olympus, whilst their will is done on earth by seemingly accidental means. The tradition of a fore-determined doom is used by the poet as an instrument for evoking fear and pity; the blindness of the agents makes us feel doubly for their fate, and gives a deeper impression of the feebleness and nothingness of man. And yet this Man, who is nothing, a shadow passing away, is the central object of our sympathies, and this life of his, so feeble in the sight of heaven, yet seems with every drama of Sophocles that is seen or read, more rich in noble possibilities.

2. For there was another conception, besides that of human nature to which the age of Pericles was giving shape and currency, and which appears for the first time in Sophocles and Thucydides. This was the notion of an Unwritten Law, to which Pericles himself refers in his funeral oration, and which Sophocles had previously expressed in his *Antigone*. Not only will the same passions have their course while man is man, but to the dispassionate observer the same principles of action will have similar issues. The persistent tendency of things is one that "makes for righteousness," and that vindicates the pure and pious soul, however deeply it may suffer. This thought is always present with Sophocles when in his highest mood, but it is not to be assumed that, like his sympathy with humanity, it has been everywhere combined with his dramatic motive. In the *Ajax*, the *Antigone*, and the two *Œdipus* plays, it is manifestly apparent. In the *Electra*, the conception of justice is more traditional ;

the motive of the *Trachiniæ* is almost purely dramatic ; that of the *Philoctetes* is largely ethical, but the poet has here passed from the general notion of an "unwritten law," to the more psychological conception of a principle of honourable feeling, which the ingenuous soul finds it impossible to violate.

CHAPTER V.

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS—CHOICE OF FABLE.

It is unnecessary to dwell here at any length on the external conditions of representation to which Athenian tragedy owed much of its peculiar form—the size of the open theatre, the performance by daylight, the small number of the actors, the continual presence of the chorus. These and other circumstances may be said to have conspired with the genius of Greek art to combine grandeur with simplicity and unity. The addition of the third actor, with which Sophocles is credited, enabled him to add something of complexity without introducing confusion.*

But there is one limitation, of a less absolute kind, to which attention may be particularly directed—that of the **choice of subject**.

The time when an audience would cry, on seeing a new hero, "This has nothing to do with Bacchus," was indeed long since passed. But so also was the period of novel enterprises, in which a drama like the *Persæ* had been possible. After that brief excursion into the region of contemporary history, tragedy had returned within the cycle of Hellenic legend. The art in fact stood on the border-line between two worlds: that of heroic tradition, which to the people's imagination was still real, and which they had begun to connect with existing political relations, and that of philosophic thought, which was still in that early phase

* For a full outline of this part of the subject the reader is again referred to Mr. Jebb's *Primer of Greek Literature*.

which can be contented with imaginative expression. When the fables were no longer believed, when philosophy was attaining clearness, the native air of tragedy was spent. (*See above*, c. 3, p. 16.)

It was impossible all at once to make a new beginning and to leap, theatre and all, out of the age of Pericles into that of Lessing and Goethe. There are isolated scenes and speeches in Euripides, which might seem to give promise of a dramatic art more comprehensive and more real than had been known hitherto, an art in which "the whole tragedy and comedy of life," of which Plato wrote, would be represented in the light of true ideas, without the inconvenient trappings of mythology. But these are, after all, but splendid patches on an inharmonious work, the occasional springing of a plant, "which bears a golden flower, but not in this soil."

The very narrowness of his range, indeed, gave to the ancient poet a capital advantage in point of reality. Greek tragedy not only took shape and growth directly from the spirit of the time, but dealt with subjects of the most vital interest. For to the Athenians of the time of Cleisthenes or of Miltiades, and later still, the local or neighbouring hero was a living power, present in their midst, whose destinies were inseparably bound up with the national existence. Hence the imagination of the ancient spectator met the poet half-way and conspired with him in the production of an atmosphere of illusion. For, as Aristotle puts it, "what is possible is credible, and what once happened was clearly possible." Whereas the utmost that can be said for a modern fable is that "the story is extant, and written in very choice Italian."

The protagonist of modern fiction is a shadowy being, who is to us only what the poet makes him. Even in going to hear an historical play we think of it chiefly as a work of imagination. Very different was the eager expectation with which the Athenians awaited the coming on of Theseus or of Heracles.

Yet these objects of reverence were sufficiently removed in time to give scope for a free handling of the fables concerning them ; a freedom used more deliberately by Sophocles than by Shakespeare.

Let it be imagined for a moment that in the sixteenth century the Warwicks and Talbots, the Cliffords and the Suffolks, of English history, had been universally believed to be of divine origin ; that their real presence had been then supposed to affect the fortunes of the parishes in which their bones were laid, and to influence affairs of state ;—that whole counties had claimed to be related to them by blood. And let it be further imagined that the merest outline of their life-history was generally known, so that the poet was as free to mould their destinies as those of Posthumus, Imogen, or Prospero. Then we may have some hint of the difference in regard to opportunities for affecting popular feeling, between Greek tragedy and the Elizabethan drama

But it is not less true that, while the modern dramatist has even an embarrassing range of choice, in the traditions of all nations, in classical poetry and in popular fiction, **the Greek tragedian was bound within the sphere of national heroic legend.** And the fables which this contained, however numerous and varied in detail, tended to ring the changes on a few striking incidents which had been impressed on the rude fancy of a primitive time. The avenger of blood, the outcast homicide, the fulfilment of the curse, the return of the exile, the recognition of the stranger, the protection of the suppliant, the purification of the polluted, the horrors of incest and parricide, are topics which continually recur. These ancient and often grotesque conceptions the poet had to make the vehicle of his art in holding up his ideal mirror to a more refined and reflective age. It would be a flagrant misconception to credit him with the invention of his fable. The story of *Œdipus*, for example, could never have been invented by Sophocles. What he has done is to make the weird tale a

means for revealing the inmost workings of the heart, for moving awe and pity in the highest degree, and for impressing anew the old lesson of the sacredness of the family. In thus humanising an archaic horror, which, because archaic, had the stronger claim on the imagination, there remains a certain amount of inevitable incongruity; although much less than where a "crownèr's quest" is spoken of in Denmark, or King Arthur is seen—

"like a modern gentleman,
Of stately port;"

less, too, than would appear if we ignored the fact, that legendary persons and events had an intense reality for the popular imagination, long after such minds as Thucydides' had outgrown them: a fact which is strikingly apparent in the orations of Lysias.

From the body of Greek legend, then, the poet had to select his theme. And, according to Aristotle, the range of choice was further narrowed, as the purpose of tragedy came to be more clearly seen, until the subjects universally applauded were confined to the histories of a few royal houses, whose fortunes supplied characters, situations, and catastrophes, of an eminently tragic nature. It is clear, however, if we turn over the fragments of Sophocles and Euripides, that Aristotle is speaking, not of their entire works, but of those which in his time were esteemed as masterpieces.

How far each poet borrowed from the earlier literature, or to what extent he relied on oral tradition, such as may have still floated round the local worship of particular heroes,* we can never know. It seems probable, as Schneidewin has shown, that Æschylus adopted some things from the lyric poets, where So-

* The tragic poet was the ally of priests and prophets, and himself exercised a kind of priesthood. Such men were always learned in tradition (λόγιοι). And a worship like that of Dionysus at Eleutheræ, or of Demeter at Eleusis, was sure to become the focus of a body of tradition which must have lived orally, whether poets gave shape to it or not.

phocles preferred to rest on the simpler Homeric narrative, not, however, as embodied in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, but in the wider cycle of later and inferior epic poetry, now lost. It does not follow from this that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were unknown to Sophocles. Tennyson does not take his subjects from Chaucer or Shakespeare, yet his poetry derives many hues from both. Even if confessedly inferior, the *Cyclus* may have been thought "good to steal from," just as the writer of a Greek tragedy in the present day might select his subject from Hyginus or Apollodorus rather than from Euripides. Or, on the other hand, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may have existed and yet not have been popular in Attica at a particular time. Such popularity would depend less upon the beauty or force of the poetry than upon the real or imaginary relation of the subject to the interests of the hearers. The "Wrath of Ajax" would have more charm for the men of Salamis than the "Wrath of Achilles." At all events many strange phenomena would be less strange than that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* should be the productions of nameless poets in historic times, and that the life in them, so unrivalled in vividness and clearness, yet so different from the life of the fifth century, should be the artificial reproduction (with whatever aids from ballad poetry) of a forgotten age.*

For the tragic poet the motives of selection were as varied as the motives of dramatic interest. A fable may have been preferred, (1) because of its association with some popular worship; (2) because of national or political interests attaching to the scene; (3) because the hero represented some Pan-Hellenic or (4) Athenian feeling; (5) because it had been already made popular through epic recitation; or (6) because of some essential aptitude for tragic handling. This last consideration can never have been absent; the others

* Our thanks are, notwithstanding, due to Professor Paley for the learning and ingenuity which he has expended in supporting his theory, and for his original and valuable suggestions respecting the history of writing and of the fine arts in Hellas.

may have been variously present, either singly or combined.

In the following list of tragic subjects which are known to have been treated by Sophocles, we may notice, first, the *absence of purely Dionysiac fables*, which, as the art was more and more refined, were mostly relegated to the satyric drama, until the "old friend with a new face" appeared once more in the *Bacchæ* of Euripides; and secondly, the *preference of human over Olympian or Titanic heroes*. An increased proportion of Attic subjects, as compared with Æschylus, has also been remarked. But considering the much smaller number of Æschylean subjects known to us, this point cannot be regarded as certain, although for the Aiantean trilogy of the one poet at least a dozen Attic fables are known to have been treated by the other. Yet these form but a seventh part of the whole, and in some cases, as in the *Triptolemus*, the choice is rather due to a religious than to a political or patriotic motive. In like manner it is probably the result of religious more than of national affinities, as well as of epic tradition, that the legends of Thebes and Argos bulk so much more largely than the legend of Corinth. The Pan-Hellenic subjects of the Trojan War and the voyage of the Argonauts were largely drawn upon by Sophocles, as appears from the following list of fables treated by him* :—

1. *Subjects connected with the Trojan War.*

Æthiopes (story of Memnon).	Euryalus.
Ajax with the Scourge.	Helen demanded back.
Ajax the Locrian.	Laconian Maidens.
Aleadae (story of Telephus).	Laocoon.
Alexander.	Lovers of Achilles (qq. satyric?).
Antenoridæ.	Mysians.
Captives (perhaps the story of Chryseis).	Nauplius 1st.
Dolopians.	Nauplius 2nd.
Eumelus.	Odysseus feigning madness.
	Palamedes.

* This string of names should be made significant by reference to a classical dictionary.

Phoenix.
Philoctetes at Lemnos.
 Philoctetes at Troy.
 Phrygians (story of Achilles).
 Polyxena.
 Priam.
 Pthiotian Women.

Shepherds (Protesilaus).
 Sinon.
 Scyrians (story of Neoptolemus).
 Teucer.
 Troilus.

2. *Subjects connected with the Return of Odysseus.*

Nausicaa.

| Odysseus Acanthoplex.

3. *Subjects connected with the Argonautic Expedition.*

Athamas 1st.
 Athamas 2nd.
 Colchian Women.
 Lemnian Women.
 Pelias.
 Phineus 1st.

Phineus 2nd.
 Phrixus.
 Root-gatherers (Medea).
 Scythians.
 Tympanistæ (?).
 Tyro.

4. *Subjects connected with the Attic Legend.*

Ægeus.
 Creusa (Ion).
 Dædalus.
 Eurysaces.
 Orithyia.
 Peleus.

Phædra.
 Procris.
 Tereus.
 Theseus (?).
 Triptolemus.

Ajax, Teucer (see under 1), and Œdipus at Colonus (see under 6),
 are also Attic subjects.

5. *Subjects connected with the Corinthian Legend.*

Hipponous
 Iobates (Bellerophon).

| Polyidus.
 Sisyphus.

6. *Subjects connected with the Theban Legend.*

Alcmeon
 Amphiaras (satyric ?).
Antigone.
 Epigoni.
 Eriphyle.

| Hydrophori (story of Semele).
 Niobe
Œdipus 1st (Tyrannus).
Œdipus 2nd (Coloneus).

7. *Subjects connected with the Legends of Argos and Mycenæ.*

Andromeda.
 Acrisius.
 Atreus.

| Chryses.
 Danae.
Electra.

Erigone.	Tantalus.
Hermione.	Thyestes 1st.
Iphigenia.	Thyestes 2nd.
Larissæans.	Tyndareus.
CEnomaus or Hippodamia.	

8. *Subjects connected with various Legends, including that of Heracles.*

Amphitryon.	Meleager.
Carnicians (story of Minos).	Thamyris.
Ixion.	Trachinian Maidens.

Subjects of Satyric Dramas, variously related to the foregoing.

Achæan gathering.	Inachus.
Cedalion.	Judgment (of Paris).
Deaf and dumb.	Marriage of Helen.
Dionysiac fable.	Momus.
Heracles at Tænarus.	Pandora.
Ichneutæ (The Searchers).	Salmoneus.

A considerable number of fables are common to all the three great dramatists. This of itself shows that large scope must have been allowed for invention, and for the various manipulation of existing materials. And the same appears from Aristotle's precept, that "the poet must himself invent, or at least exercise much skill in using what is handed down." How Sophocles employed this licence will appear when we examine the structure of his extant plays. It is probable that he felt less free than Euripides did to make radical changes, or to adopt at different times contradictory versions of the same legend, as he held more firmly to the reality of the religious and traditional groundwork of his art. Neither had he the bold inventiveness of Æschylus, in whom the myth-creating instinct was still active. But he has used the greatest care in selecting, arranging, and modifying the details of each story, as best suited his dramatic purpose.

CHAPTER VI.

ARGUMENTS OF THE SEVEN EXTANT PLAYS.

IF Sophocles ever said of himself that "after playing off the Æschylean magniloquence he had changed to a more moderate and equable style, until he at last arrived at his best manner, which might be described as ethical or human," we have no means of verifying his assertion. For the seven remaining dramas probably all belong to a period in which his genius was already mature. But we can trace in them certain minor differences which are not uninteresting.

Thus in the *Ajax* there is a degree of inequality not apparent in the rest, as if dramatic unity had not yet been perfectly attained; in the *Antigone*, on the other hand, a severe simplicity, as of a Phidian group; in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, a combination of unity with fulness and complexity which marks it as the highest effort of dramatic construction; lastly, in the *Œdipus Coloneus* and *Philoctetes* a decided change of tone, a mellow and more romantic mood, where horror softens into pathos. These two are reported to be the latest, the two first named are generally supposed to be the earliest, of the extant tragedies. The *Electra* may be conveniently placed before, and the *Trachiniæ* after, the *Œdipus Tyrannus*. The order, then, is *Aj.*, *Ant.*, *El.*, *Œd. Tyr.*, *Trach.*, *Œd. Col.*, *Phil.*

1. The *Ajax* was taken from the *Little Iliad*, an epic narrating the end of the Trojan War, and the

subject had a peculiar national interest for the Athenians.*

Ajax, son of Telamon, and grandson of Æacus—whom, as a demigod, the Athenians believed to have given them present help at Salamis—was in his lifetime the most valiant, after Achilles, of the Greeks at Troy. But when Achilles was dead, and his armour was offered as a prize to “the most valiant,” the claims of the mighty warrior were rejected in favour of Odysseus, whose wisdom had so often saved the host. At this the hero fell into a rage, which Athena, Odysseus’ patron, changed to madness. She did so partly to punish Ajax for his pride, and partly out of care for the generals, whom Ajax would have slain. But the heaven-sent illusion made him turn his hand instead against the cattle belonging to the army

Thus the lives of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Odysseus, were saved; but **the honour of Ajax, which he had thought to vindicate, received a mortal blow.** And Sophocles is nowhere more effective than in making us feel the intolerable death-throes of the great wounded heart. We see how he is beloved by the Salaminian mariners who followed him; with what affection Tecmessa (at once his Briseis and Andromache) leans upon him; how great he seems to those nearest to him, how they prize the tender heart that beats under the untameable breast. We are witnesses of this tenderness as he pours it forth over his infant boy, we trace it beneath his roughness to Tecmessa. We perceive also the unflinching will that, when not thwarted by madness, goes straight to its end, and with open face encounters the inevitable; yet is careful to provide for those who are left behind.

The hero’s solitude of spirit is increased by the absence of Teucer, his half-brother, who alone could have understood the situation. On first awaking from

* According to Plutarch, Alcibiades counted Eurysaces, the son of Ajax, amongst his maternal ancestors.

his madness he knows that he must not live, and calls for Teucer to receive his last commands. Not finding him, he breaks forth in lamentation, and speaks in a strain which alarms Tecmessa, who implores him not to leave her desolate and his boy an orphan amongst his foes. He will not listen to her, and the tent door is closed, while the chorus express their longing for bright Salamis, and their sorrow for their ruined lord.

He comes forth again, after long brooding in silence, and professes himself changed in mood. And, although his purpose is unaltered, his rage is really somewhat calmed, and this makes it easier for him to elude the suspicions of Tecmessa and the mariners, who are ready to believe what they desire. He leaves them with ambiguous words; and while they are rejoicing over his restoration a messenger announces the return of Teucer, and tells how, on approaching the angry chiefs, he received from Calchas a friendly warning that the life of Ajax would be imperilled if he left his tent. On this, Tecmessa entreats the mariners to go with her in search of Ajax.

By a bold device, not afterwards repeated in Greek tragedy, the chorus then leave the orchestra, parting several ways: the scene changes to a wood near Rhoeteum, and the attention of the spectators is concentrated on the solitary figure of Ajax, who is discovered to them preparing for death. And by another boldness, which is indeed unique, and a breach of a supposed convention,* we are enabled not only to hear his last soliloquy, but to see him fall upon his sword. Thus the audience are taken fully into the confidence of the "Man of lonely mind," and an impression is produced on them which would have been otherwise impossible.†

The chorus re-enter dispersedly, as if still in search, but appear baffled, until they hear a cry from Tec-

* "Ne coram populo pueros Medea trucidet."

† In the adventurous spirit which has prompted this successful experiment there is perhaps a reminiscence of Æschylus.

messa, who has found the body. In the midst of their lamentation Teucer at last appears, and after sending an attendant with Tecmessa to secure the child, bursts forth into an agony of sorrow and indignation. To him Menelaus comes and denies burial to the public enemy. Finding that Teucer does not yield to bare authority he goes to bring help, and Teucer goes to hasten his preparations. As he returns, he is met first by Tecmessa coming with the child and then by Agamemnon, who is in a rage. A violent altercation follows, and a fray is imminent, when Odysseus comes upon the scene. The whole truth had been revealed to him by Athena (this the spectators saw in the opening of the play), and he has learned from her the lesson of moderation. To his wise and humane counsels Agamemnon yields with a bad grace, and the hero is buried. Thus the death of Ajax is only the turning-point in the interest of this drama, which was sustained for the Athenian audience through the horror which they would feel at the idea of their heroic protector being denied the honours or the grave.

2. The **Antigone** also turns on the importance attached to funeral rites. It is founded on an incident in the tale of Thebes, which had been touched by Æschylus, and was afterwards employed by Euripides and by the authors of the *Two Noble Kinsmen*, viz. the edict which forbade the interment of Polynices and those who fought with him against his brother Eteocles. According to Sophocles it is Creon who, on his ascension to the suddenly vacant throne, proclaims that the rebel prince shall lie unburied; and it is Antigone alone, the sister of both princes and ward of Creon, who defies the unjust law, and fills up the sorrows of the house of Œdipus with an act of daring piety. Her death, like that of Ajax, is not the catastrophe, but the central crisis of the drama. Deeply as our sympathies have been awakened by her heroic ardour and by the pathos of her end, we are still more awe-stricken by the vindication of the truth for which

she suffers, and the doom which falls on Creon. Bereaved of his children and of his wife, and cursed by her as the murderer of both his sons, he lives on in a desolation that is far worse than death.*

3. In the *Electra*, Sophocles has made *the centre point of the Oresteian trilogy* the subject of a single drama. He goes back to the simpler and sterner form of the legend, in which the matricide of Orestes is unequivocally regarded as a heaven-prescribed act of retribution, without which the dead chieftain must remain dishonoured, and his issue disinherited and oppressed :

“ When Orestes comes to manhood, and shall long for his own
land,
Then Atrides shall have vengeance, rendered by his son’s right
hand.”

The excuses for Clytemnestra’s crime, on which Æschylus dwells, are made light of, and her avenging furies—the Eumenides—are put out of sight, or are remembered only in the vain threats of the dying Ægisthus.

Notwithstanding the religious sanction of Orestes’ act, the horror of it would be too glaring, but for the part of his sister, whose character and sufferings enlist the sympathies of the spectators on the side of justice. She is the heroine of endurance, as Antigone is the heroine of daring. The motive is in both cases affection—Antigone’s for a dead brother, Electra’s for a murdered father. Antigone is cut off in the flower of her age, Electra outlives her youth in cherishing amidst wrong and outrage the memory of her father and the hope which centres in her brother.

The action of the *Electra* goes straight forward to the dreadful and yet desired end. For the spectator, there is no intermediate culmination of interest, like the suicide of Ajax, or the sudden coming of Teiresias in the *Antigone*. But in their sympathy with Electra

* For a fuller account of the *Antigone*, see below, c. vii. p. 62.

they pass through a similar crisis, when the feigned death of Orestes destroys her last remaining hope; and, unsupported even by her sister, she determines to kill Ægisthus with her own hand. Her recognition of her brother is a fine example of the revulsion from grief to the excess of joy. Nowhere is the truth of old Hellenic feeling, with all its native intensity of love and hate, of affection and of vindictiveness, more vividly reflected than in the concluding scenes of this tragedy,—the least “modern” of the seven plays.

4. In the **Œdipus Tyrannus**, Sophocles has similarly chosen to work round the *central crisis of the great Theban legend*, which Æschylus had treated more at large; but whereas in the *Electra* he has fused horror and satisfaction into one, in the *Œdipus* he dares to show us the unalleviated downfall of the noble but passionate king. Our horror and pity are wrought up to the height, as we see one who deserves all sympathy plunged from a pinnacle of glory into an abyss of misery, humiliation, and shame.

This essentially tragic subject is treated with an amount of force, elaboration, and finish, unequalled even in Sophocles. In the opening we are made to feel the popularity of Œdipus, the happiness of his marriage with Jocasta, the unbroken harmony of his relations with Creon (his wife’s brother), with the seer Teiresias, with all the world. The calamity of the plague has only drawn his people nearer to him.

The response of Phœbus for which the king has sent, and which is proclaimed by his desire, commands the banishment of Laius’ murderer or murderers. He himself enforces the proclamation with elaborate curses on the criminal, on all who harbour or conceal him, on the people if they do not drive him forth. He calls for evidence, and is told that only one of Laius’ attendants had survived, and that he had merely given a confused account of an assault by a band of robbers. This clue is disregarded by Œdipus as too slight for use.

He sends for Teiresias, and Teiresias denounces

Œdipus as the guilty man, hinting not obscurely at far worse than murder. The king flashes out in passionate wrath, but is calmed for a moment by the mention of his parents. Who were they? This was the mystery that had once absorbed his thoughts, and this, as it would seem, the prophet could tell. But the king's anger soon resumes its sway, and now extends to Creon, by whose advice the prophet had been sent for. A long altercation between the brothers-in-law is interrupted by the entrance of the queen, whose ascendancy over her husband and her brother is soon perceived. Creon at last retires, although Œdipus is not yet pacified, and the king and queen are left alone together on the stage. The chorus remain in the orchestra, but take no part in what now follows. Jocasta insists on knowing the cause of strife, and hears what Teiresias has said. She mocks at it, and to justify her contempt for prophecy, relates how Laius had been told by an oracle that he should be slain by their son, if one were born to them. A son was born, but was instantly maimed and fettered by Laius' own hand, and left by his command to die on a lone mountain-side. "But Laius," Jocasta goes on to say, "was slain long afterwards in a chance encounter, we are told, with strangers at a cross-road "

The last word, which the queen adds to mark triumphantly the fortuitous manner of Laius' death, as in every circumstance so unlike the prophecy, instead of reassuring Œdipus, awakens in him the memory of a half-forgotten scene, that "chance encounter with strangers at a cross-road," in which he had killed his man. In profound perturbation he begs for a description of Laius, and is told that he was aged, but in general appearance resembling Œdipus himself; for the locality of the cross-road, and is told "at the parting of the ways to Thebes from Daulia and Delphi." He now eagerly bids send for the man whose evidence had before seemed too slight for use; and for the first time tells Jocasta the story of his life; the vexing doubt about his parentage which had

driven him to consult the oracle ; the terrible response of Phœbus, which had determined him never to return to his Corinthian home, his meeting with the venerable traveller, their quarrel, and the sudden blow. If this old stranger should prove to have been Laius, whose kingdom Œdipus has taken, whose wife he holds, whose murderer he has himself proclaimed an outcast ! “What more horrible can be conceived ?” (But the spectator knows that this is only the beginning of horrors.)

Jocasta is herself so far affected by the fears of Œdipus, as to have prepared to sacrifice to Apollo, when news comes of the death of Œdipus’ supposed father, Polybus. The king is thus freed from one of the terrors which had haunted him. The father is dead, and not by the son’s hand. Besides, he is sovereign-elect of his own city, Corinth, and is no longer equally affected by what relates to Thebes. But one dread still haunts him. His (supposed) mother, Merope, still lives. Must he not fear the part of the prophecy which relates to her ? The Corinthian messenger is able to remove this scruple. He had, indeed, been specially interested in bringing the tidings of Œdipus’ elevation. For it was he who had received the foundling from the hands of another shepherd, and had given him to Polybus, who brought him up as his own son.

The mystery which had tormented Œdipus in youth, is thus opened again and all but solved, and the passion of unravelling it once more possesses him exclusively. Jocasta already sees the dreadful truth, and, after vainly adjuring the unhappy one to desist, goes out in silence. But Œdipus remains, and is encouraged by the chorus to pursue his reckless quest.

Then the Theban peasant, who was with Laius when he was slain, and has twice been sent for, is brought in against his will. At first he sees in Œdipus only the slayer of his lord. But when he is reminded of the child whom he himself by Laius’ orders had carried into the mountain-land, and, against orders,

had given to the Corinthian, *who stands there*; when told by that Corinthian that the man he knows to have killed Laius and married Jocasta *is that very child*, his horror is only exceeded by that of Œdipus, who is now aware of all.

Here the action culminates; and the power of Sophocles is nowhere more remarkable than in sustaining the interest beyond this point through the concluding 500 lines. We have first the vivid narrative of the messenger who reports the suicide of Jocasta and the action of Œdipus in putting out his eyes; then the "side-piercing sight" of the self-blinded king, and his lamentation, to which the chorus feebly respond (for what sympathy can reach such misery?); then a fiery outburst, justifying his act, and demanding to be cast forth from Thebes; then a gentler scene with Creon, who brings his children to him for a last embrace (at which the gathered tears of the spectators are sure to flow). Lastly, he is led alone within the palace, to await the final judgment of the God.

The effect of the *Œdipus Tyrannus* greatly depends on the intensity with which the sacredness of family relationships is revered. In a state like that which Plato projected, or in such a world as Shelley dreamed of, this play would be incomparably less impressive than it is to the common sentiment either of ancient or modern times. That which the modern reader is more apt to miss is the clinging fondness for the mother state, which embittered the exile of Œdipus from Corinth, which made the hope of returning to her as king so all-absorbing to him, and greatly added to the horror of the doom that finally drove him as an outcast from Thebes.

5. In the play called, from its chorus, **The Trachinian Maidens**, Sophocles has again depicted the irremediable consequence of an unconscious deed.

The story of Heracles had heretofore been a subject of epic rather than of tragic handling. The moment which Sophocles selects is that in which Deianira sends the poisoned robe, and his subject is

the ruin brought upon a household through a fatal attachment, such as that of Heracles for Iole. The "last love" of Heracles not only works the destruction of the maiden's home and fatherland, but through its natural effect on Deianira, the wife of his youth, fulfils the cruel intention of their worst enemy.

We see Deianira first in her forlorn solitude, in the strange land of Trachis, whither they had been driven through the act of Heracles in killing Iphitus (the brother of Iole). She knows that a crisis of their fate is near at hand, and imparts her fears for her husband to their son Hyllus, who has heard a rumour of his father's enslavement to the Lydian Omphale, and of his being now engaged in besieging Œchalia (the city of Eurytus, the father of Iole). Hyllus goes at once to seek his father.

The vague report is followed by the entrance of a neighbour, who tells that Lichas, the forerunner of Heracles, is already come, and that the hero himself is on his way. Deianira is transported with a sudden joy, which is shared by the chorus, consisting of the friends whom Deianira has made amongst the young women of the town where she is a stranger.

Lichas enters, bringing a train of captive women from Œchalia. At their head is Iole, for whose sake the city has been taken. This fact, however, Lichas carefully conceals, not as having been so commanded, but because he naturally shrinks from openly wounding the feelings of the queen. The appearance of Iole, and her evident sense of her misfortune, enlist the sympathy of Deianira, who longs to know who the maiden is, but will not press upon her with importunate questioning.

The captives have followed Lichas into the house, and Deianira is going too, when she is rudely arrested by the rustic messenger. He has listened with impatience to the herald's falsehood, and indignantly tells her how Lichas had previously declared to the Trachinian people that she whom he was leading home was a princess and his master's bride.

Thus the queen is suddenly cast down from the height of her joy. Already half-bewildered, she re-examines Lichas, who comes forth again. Dissembling the bitterness that is springing at her heart, she requires him to tell her all the truth. He does so, and they go within—Lichas to prepare for his departure, Deianira to get ready the gift, which has instantaneously occurred to her own mind. While the stage is vacant, the chorus tell the tale of the nuptials of Heracles and Deianira long ago.

Deianira then comes forth and confides to them her grief and her intention. The Centaur Nessus, who encountered them on their wedding-journey, and was thereon slain by Heracles with an arrow, had instructed her to save some of the blood from his wound as a charm by which she might hereafter secure her husband's love. She had now put it to the proof, by anointing with it the sacrificial robe she had prepared for Heracles;—not without a shadow of misgiving; but this is quite overborne when Lichas re-appears and asks for her commands. She gives the casket into his hands and then retires. The chorus joyously anticipate the speedy return of Heracles. Deianira once more appears to them, but with changed aspect. She is now full of alarm. The corroding effect of the blood upon the wool she had steeped in it for tinging the robe convinces her that it has a deadly power, and was not the wound caused by a poisoned arrow? Was not Nessus smarting with his death-wound? She forebodes the worst, and declares that she will not survive it.

Hyllus now re-enters, no longer bright and careless, but with looks of agonised hate. He vividly describes the effect of the envenomed garment, and curses his mother for having killed his father. Utterly broken-hearted she attempts no answer, but goes silently forth; and while the awe-stricken maidens are imagining her as weeping over her error, an aged woman of the household comes and tells them of her desperate end. She had plunged a knife into her side. Before they have

time to mourn over her death, Heracles is himself brought in silently. He has been asleep or swooning, but awakes in paroxysms. The recurring note amongst his ravings is that of revenge on her, the smiling fury, whose cunning has entangled him in this web of death.

Hyllus has by this time learned the truth, and with difficulty obtains a hearing from his father. No word of pity for Deianira falls from Heracles; but when he knows all, he is silent with regard to her, and wholly absorbed in the fulfilment of his own destiny. He is urgent to be carried to Mount Cæta and immediately placed upon the pyre.

The *Trachiniæ* contains no hint of the glory that was to follow in the apotheosis of Heracles. The subject is treated entirely from the human side (with what humanity¹), and the end is dark.

6 The **Œdipus at Colonus** resumes the Theban story at a point not previously handled, intermediate between the subjects of the *Œdipus Tyrannus* and the *Antigone*.

Hitherto, so far as we know, Sophocles had not made the restoration of the unfortunate a theme for tragedy. His single plays had corresponded more nearly to the central drama of an Æschylean trilogy than to the drama of reconcilment, of which the *Eumenedes* is the surviving example. But the two plays which are believed to be the work of his old age are both of this character. This possibly indicates some change both in the poet and the audience, which may be inferred also from the fact that in the *Œdipus Coloneus*, as in the *Supplices* and *Heracliidæ* of Euripides, there is a more direct appeal than elsewhere to Athenian patriotic sentiment. It may well have been that after the disaster at Syracuse, as her allies fell from her towards the close of the Peloponnesian War, Athens may have cared less to be harrowed than to be soothed, and praises of her humanity and piety may at that time have been more than ever grateful to her.

The *Œdipus Coloneus* is a sublime religious poem ;

but, as compared with the two other Theban plays, it must be acknowledged to have less of concentrated tragic power. The dramatic structure is still most admirable, but more scope is given to lyrical and rhetorical effects.

The fate of Œdipus, the hero of Sophocles' chief tragedy, was linked in a local myth with the most sacred place of Colonus, the birthplace of Sophocles, and a favourite resort of the more wealthy Athenians. This class, which was now rising into predominance, would be ready to share the poet's fondness for "Colonus of the Horsemen," as the suburb was called in contradistinction to a spot of the same name within the city.

But the interest of the myth itself reached beyond these associations. For it raised the whole question of the nature of guilt, and of the final acceptance of the author of an unconscious crime.

Œdipus had involuntarily broken an eternal law. He had lost home and country, and had fallen from power. But was he eternally condemned? The local myth said "No." His name at Colonus was joined with sacred traditions of atonement and redemption, and of the final vindication of the noble and well-intentioned spirit, even when it has fallen. The vindication of Ajax and of Antigone came after death; but Œdipus has the assurance of peace before he dies. The Furies, whose shrine is at Colonus, receive him within their precinct; Theseus protects him and his; his grave becomes the earnest of Athenian victory against his own countrymen, who have persisted in rejecting him when the gods were willing to restore him. In working out this theme Sophocles gives its last development to that germ of mystical religious faith which lay deep in tragedy.*

The argument of this long drama may be briefly given. Blind Œdipus, led by Antigone, his faithful daughter, arrives at the grove of the Eumenides, and

* See above, c. ii. p. 11.

is told by an Athenian wayfarer that he is encroaching on sacred ground. He accepts the omen, and utters a solemn prayer. But when the guardians of the precinct are seen approaching, he retires with the child. The chorus of Coloniata elders enter, searching vainly for the trespasser. He presents himself, and they shudder at his boldness, while pitying his blindness, but are still more horrified on learning who he is. At first they bid him begone, but yield to Antigone's entreaty and his own impressive words so far as to send for Theseus to determine a question that is too hard for them. Meanwhile he must stand without the sacred boundary.

Ismene now arrives with news from Thebes. The quarrel between Polynices and Eteocles is coming to a crisis, and an oracle has said that the victory will be with those whom Œdipus joins. Œdipus will join with neither party of his countrymen, but with the Athenians if they will protect him against the attempts of Thebes.

Theseus comes and promises protection. The chorus then gives a tardy welcome to the stranger. Meanwhile Ismene has been sent to make propitiatory offerings to the Eumenides.

Then Creon enters with fair-sounding proposals from the Thebans, who wish, because of the oracle, to have Œdipus on their side. They offer to take the old man home again. But Œdipus knows that they will not give him asylum or burial in his native land.

Creon throws off the mask and resorts to violence. His men have carried off Ismene, and he sends Antigone away. Thus Œdipus is left alone, and Creon is threatening to drag him off, when Theseus re-enters and commands the intruder to restore the maidens. The king himself sets forth in their pursuit.

For the moment Œdipus is left alone upon the stage, and the chorus cheer him by anticipating victory. Theseus soon returns, bringing the maidens with him, to the father's intense joy. But Œdipus is now to learn that his son also, Polynices, is at hand. He refuses to see him, until prevailed on by Anti-

gone, and, when he comes, he thunders curses on him. The gloom of this moment is relieved by the affection of the sisters, and by Antigone's promise to her brother, which the spectator who knows the earlier work of Sophocles is assured that she will perform.

After the departure of Polynices a violent storm comes on, in which Œdipus acknowledges the token of his release. Theseus is once more sent for, and finally pledges his faith to Œdipus and his daughters. Under miraculous guidance the blind man then leads the way towards his last resting-place, while the chorus sing a hymn to the powers below.

When they have ended, one of Theseus' train returns and reports how Œdipus, after parting from his daughters, had led the king in advance of his followers, and had disappeared, no man could tell how, or where. The daughters come in and make lamentation for their father, until, last of all, Theseus enters once again, and pacifies them.

7. The **Philoctetes** is also a drama of reconciliation, but its interest is less prominently religious and more purely ethical. In several points, however, it resembles the *Œdipus Coloneus*, turning as it does on the restoration of one who had been rejected, on the frustration of attempts to carry out the purpose of the gods through violent or unworthy means, and on the moral beauty of faithfulness in the young. The subject of the *Philoctetes*, like that of the *Ajax*, was taken from the *Little Iliad*.

It was fated that Troy should be taken by the son of Achilles with the help of Philoctetes wielding the bow of Heracles. The gods had delayed this consummation by causing the wound which disabled Philoctetes and made his presence noisome to the host. Ignorant of what should be, Odysseus and Diomed had carried him away and left him upon a desert rock. But now, in the tenth year, the divine purpose was made known, and Odysseus, taking with him Achilles' son Neoptolemus, sought to bring back the man whom he had formerly cast forth.

But he knew that Philoctetes would not listen to him, and would be too proud to return after such treatment. Therefore he had recourse to guile, and persuaded Neoptolemus to second him by false pretences. The interest of the drama lies in the gradual effect produced on the ingenuous heart of the boy by the sufferings of Philoctetes, by his frank belief in the fictitious tale, by his openhearted friendship, and by his unbounded trust in one who is deceiving him ; until at length, in spite of the strongest motives, it becomes a moral impossibility for Neoptolemus to persevere in his attempt. He is on the point of taking Philoctetes home to Scyros, having relinquished his own ambition, when Heracles appears from heaven, and changes the obdurate mind of the wronged hero. Thus the will of the gods is accomplished without the aid of crooked human policy, the ambition of Neoptolemus is gratified without the loss of essential nobleness, and Philoctetes, after his long endurance of affliction, becomes the saviour of the host. Asclepius himself is sent to heal him of his wound.

If this drama has less of fire and movement than the *Antigone*, in fineness and delicacy of characterisation it stands alone. It is full of romantic and suggestive contrasts of situation and motive. Nowhere in the range of dramatic literature have such simple means been more subtly employed. The greater part consists of one long dialogue between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, in which the interest never for a moment flags, but rises step by step, until the joy of the spectator over the act of Neoptolemus in returning the bow is hardly less than that of Philoctetes in receiving it. This effect is partly assisted by external means (the pain of Philoctetes is a sort of invisible third actor; the bow is a palpable symbol of life for one person and of glory for the other), but is chiefly due to the skill with which the interaction of heart on heart is made apparent in successive moments, and to the creation of two characters, which in the given situation are of the highest interest.

CHAPTER VII.

METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION—I. INVENTION; II. ARRANGEMENT.

It is probable that Æschylus by linking together successive actions into trilogies, made tragedy more complex than it was at first. And Sophocles, in again producing single plays, might seem to be returning to pristine simplicity. But what he really did was to condense the Æschylean trilogy into one complex drama, having (as Aristotle puts it) a beginning, middle, and end. By the studied adjustment of various parts he produces a supreme unity of effect.

I.—This is not to be understood as if the beauty of a Sophoclean tragedy were merely the result of contrivance. Much rather, his subtlety as a contriver is to be accounted for by the intensity of his conception. He began his career at a moment when the instrument he was to use had been brought nearly to perfection and required only a few touches of his hand (such as the enlargement of the chorus and the addition of the third actor), when the materials that lay before him both in legend and in the popular imagination had reached a high state of plastic impressibility. He had not, like Æschylus, to remodel these, but merely to use them as vehicles for expression.

1. His originality is shown in the power with which he conceives and represents each fable as a typical human action. He has brooded over it until, in the light of experience and thought, and of his knowledge of man, it lives afresh within him as a new-

born reality, breathing the life, not of any former age, but of his own age, and of this, not the outward appearance, but the inner spirit, projected in forms of universal humanity. The tale to be dramatised had been already told by epic poets, recited by rhapsodists—it may often have been already placed upon the stage. But it must be made to live and move before the Athenians as the latest offspring of time. The fate of the hero must thrill their hearts with instantaneous pity. To effect this, the poet darts at once to the core of the situation as between man and man, the motives which must have led to it, the shocks of passion which such an event must have involved. As Dante, in gazing on the pale forms of Francesca and her lover, muses involuntarily on the human error that had brought them to that pass, so, in contemplating the persons of some old heroic legend, Sophocles imagines with a directness and simplicity never equalled, the steps of passionate action through which the given issue must have come, not amongst gods or demigods, nor merely amongst Athenians, but amongst human beings. And thus by the alchemy of primal sympathy, a fragment of mythological tradition becomes a thing of power and beauty at the moment, and a possession and delight for every time.

2. The fable thus conceived is not merely described but enacted; *i.e.* outwardly realised and set forth in vivid movement before the spectators. It is because the poet's mind is so steadily fixed on this practical aim, that he is so sparing of brilliant passages and effects, that none of his works can be fairly judged except as a whole. The anonymous author of the *Life*, in saying that Sophocles excelled in bringing a whole personality before the mind in a few words, has just touched on the surface the great fact of the penetrative sympathy with which these tragedies are everywhere instinct. The horror of the tale of Thebes or Argos falls into the background; the interest of particular situations is subordinated: all else con-

verges towards the one aim of moving the spectator to an absorbing interest in the crisis of a passionate life. Sophocles realised by an inherent, inalienable impulse the aspiration of the true artist, who "wants more and more to approach the heart of every subject and not let himself be won aside by anything, however lovely, that could for a moment give the effect of playing or trifling with it."

3. It is frequently said that the story of an ancient tragedy was known beforehand to the audience, whereas the interest of a modern drama depends greatly on the novelty of the plot. This observation is only partially true. The saying of Aristotle that "even where the fable is known, it is known only to the few," is equally applicable to the greatest works of the ancient and of the modern stage.

But it is true that all great tragedy appeals not to curiosity but to sympathy; and it is erroneous either to blame or praise a Sophoclean plot with reference to what is called "intrigue," *i.e.* the ingenious devices by which a *dénouement* is delayed or concealed. We are rather called upon to admire the fineness, and yet the force and sharpness, of those **gradations in the development of the action**, by which sympathetic interest is awakened, held, prolonged, intensified, deepened, and indelibly fixed. And by "the development of the action" it is not meant that much is actually *done* upon the stage. The chief events are often such as can only be reported. But we are made present witnesses of what the agents *feel*, and that with such living reality that we become identified with them. We live their life with them, and share in their emotions.

4. The unity of design which marks each of the seven plays is **less a unity of thought than of feeling**. It is here that artistic conception differs from philosophical. For example, in following the hint given by Æschylus and conceiving the *Antigone*, the poet did not begin by weighing the claims of the family against civic authority, or think it well to warn

mankind against yielding to generous passion, against taking even righteous emotion as an absolute guide. But with the sympathy of a pious heart he felt for Antigone, while he also saw clearly the plea that might be urged for Creon. His design was not to solve, nor even to state, the practical problem, but to make men feel the pathos of the situation. It is because he *felt* it in all its bearings that he chose to dramatise it, and not merely because he *thought*, as he certainly did, that Antigone was profoundly right and that Creon was profoundly wrong.

Hence it would be a mistake to formulate too sharply the **single prevailing theme of each drama**, although, since feeling too has categories, an expression may be found for each. Thus the *Ajax* may be described as the tragedy of wounded honour, the *Antigone*, that of the Nemesis of affection; the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, of the fall from glory to shame; the *Electra*, of stern justice; the *Trachiniae*, of love and jealousy; while in the *Œdipus Coloneus* and the *Philoctetes* there is a conflict followed by a reconciliation, in the former between religious hope and fear, in the latter between fidelity and ambition. Not that the theme was first chosen, and then the fable; but in dwelling on the fable, chosen perhaps with some fore-feeling of its adaptability to a certain mood, the genius of the poet ran at once infallibly, like a spider at watch, along the main thread of emotion that was set vibrating by the elements of the story, and caught that typical aspect of human experience, which he knew that the crude mass, when polished by his art, would be most capable of reflecting. He may be said to have entered the heart of man or woman at the point where a breach was indicated, and to have carried forth its secret unimpaired.

5. In this spirit the **decisive moment** was seized: Ajax awaking from his madness amongst the slaughtered cattle; Antigone having heard the proclamation and going forth to enact her holy crime; Orestes before the palace gate, while Electra is despairing within;

King Œdipus receiving from Creon the command of Phœbus to drive out the polluted man; Deianira sending Hyllus forth to find his father; blind Œdipus at the grove of the Eumenides; Odysseus and Neoptolemus watching for Philoctetes.

At the same time, such **antecedent circumstances** as were directly relevant had to be carefully considered. It is chiefly here that Sophocles has seen fit to modify the original legends so as to obtain an effective background for his fable. Thus it is determined that Polybus shall not be king of Sicyon but of Corinth, because the relative positions of Corinth, Thebes, Citheron, and Delphi, will then give colour to the invention which makes the pivot of the action—that the shepherds of Laius and Polybus had fed their flocks in the same pastures; and will also render the meeting of Œdipus with Laius more probable. Orestes must not be saved by his nurse, or by a confidential servant, nor sent from home by Clytemnestra before her crime, but given by Electra to the Pædagogus at the time of Agamemnon's death. This adds significance to the old man's part, and shows the faithfulness of Electra, whose long waiting for her brother's return becomes more pathetic. Similarly, in the *Trachiniæ*, Deianira is not recently married to Hercules, as in the earlier legend, but has borne him many sons, of whom the eldest, Hyllus, is grown up. The long time of patient constancy adds to the pathos of her wrong, and the stroke falling from the "dead hand" after so many years is more impressive.

6. Then came the **adjustment of the persons**; the discrimination of the part to be played by Odysseus, Tecmessa, Teucer, in the *Ajax*; by Electra and the Pædagogus; by Jocasta or Theseus; the contrasting of Ismene or Chrysothemis with their heroic sisters, of the coolness of Odysseus or Creon with the passionate feelings of Ajax or Œdipus; the employment of minor characters to cement the action, as of the watchman in the *Antigone*, and of the Theban shepherd in the first *Œdipus*; of heralds and other mes-

sengers generally; and above all of the prophet, as of Calchas in the *Ajax*, and Teiresias in the *Antigone* and *Œdipus Tyrannus*.

Equally, if not more important, was the **selection and adaptation of the chorus**, which in Sophocles can hardly be separated from the *dramatis personæ*, but may be almost ranked amongst those secondary characters, whose function is to throw the main action into relief. Thus, on the one hand, Electra is supported by the Argive matrons, who second and justify her complaint; Deianira by the Trachinian maidens, whose affection she has won, but who are too young to enter into her sorrow; Œdipus by the Theban elders, whose loyalty adds pathos to his fall. The mariners of Ajax and Neoptolemus, on the other hand, are too dependent on their chiefs to give them real help; whence Ajax is more solitary, and Neoptolemus is thrown more upon himself. Antigone has an adverse chorus in the Theban elders, who feel faintly for her, but are bound to support authority; so has Philoctetes in the mariners, until the end of the play. The chorus in the *Œdipus Coloneus* are at first adverse and afterwards friendly; but their narrower religion is throughout contrasted with the "celestial light shining inward," which is the old hero's only guide.

II. So much for the ingredients of the drama. What is the poet's manner of fusing them together?

1. The first step was to put the audience in possession of the immediate situation, to mark the point from which the action begins. In Sophocles, the chorus never opens the play. Attention is at once fixed upon the stage and upon individuals. Antecedent circumstances are not dwelt upon at the opening, except so far as is necessary to define the moment. We are carried at once *in medias res*. The **prologos**, or opening scene, is part of the train of action which it ushers in. With one exception, there is no introductory soliloquy. A few short strokes of rapid dialogue suffice to indicate both the persons and the

position of affairs. And for the soliloquy of Deianira, with which the *Trachiniæ* opens, there is a special reason. It marks, as nothing else could do, that loneliness of the wife of Heracles, which is a chief element of the actual situation.

In the *Antigone*, *Œdipus Tyrannus*, *Trachiniæ*, and *Œdipus Coloneus* the protagonist or chief person, *i.e.* the hero or heroine, comes immediately upon the stage. In the *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and *Electra* the entrance of the protagonist is made more impressive by being delayed; and the dialogue between the first speakers apprises the spectators of that which the other *dramatis personæ* are not to know. In *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Œd. Tyr.*, and *Œd. Col.* the exit after the prologos leaves the stage vacant, so that the entrance of the chorus makes a new beginning, and has the undivided attention of the audience. In the *Trachiniæ* and *Philoctetes* there is no such break; but the chorus on entering address a person on the stage. In the *Electra* there is a break, but this is followed by the entrance of Electra, to whom the chorus enter. Thus, in five of the plays, the "induction," though consisting of dialogue, and forming part of the action, has the effect of a separate scene. This is most apparent in the *Ajax* and *Antigone*.

2. The **parodos**, or first entrance of the chorus, is more formal in the *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and *Œd. Tyr.*, than in the *Electra*, *Œd. Col.*, and *Philoctetes*. In these we have what is called a "commatic parodos,"* *i.e.* an interchange of lyric measures between the chorus on its first entrance and an actor on the stage. The parodos of the *Trachiniæ* is intermediate between the regular and the "commatic" parodos, as it consists of lyric measures addressed by the chorus to Deianira, who remains silent.

There is a good reason for each of these variations. Electra's monody must precede the entrance of the chorus, in order to make us feel the loneli-

* *Commatic*, from *Commos*, a lament.

ness of her sorrow; and in the parodos, as throughout the play, the part of the chorus is subordinated to that of Electra, whose prominence must by all means be sustained. In the *Œd. Col.* the chorus can take no definite action until Theseus has given them the lead. Hence the contrast between the broken utterances of this commatic parodos and the sustained splendour of the central ode. Similarly in the *Philoctetes*, the chorus, who are subordinate to Neoptolemus, can say nothing definite until he makes a decision; and the interchange between them and their young chief prepares the way for the impression that is to be produced by the entrance of the hero.

3. **The ground of the action has now been laid.** The spectator has been made aware of the position, whether of apparent security or danger, in which the chief agents are supposed to stand at the outset, and has been led to feel the aspect in which they are regarded by the world surrounding them.

The situation thus generally indicated is further developed, either by a speech from one of the persons on whom the action hinges, as in the *Ant.*, *Œd. Tyr.*, *Trach.*, or by a continuation of lyric measures followed by such a speech, as in the *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Œd. Col.*, *Phil.*

At this point the action, which has hitherto maintained an even tenour, is stirred and shaken by the **occurrence or revelation of a fresh incident**, such as Ajax's declaration of his intention to commit suicide; the report that Polynices has been buried; the dream of Clytemnestra, *El.* 405 foll.; the denunciation of Œdipus by Teiresias; the announcement of the return of Heracles; the arrival of Ismene in *Œd. Col.*, the lie of Neoptolemus. In some of the plays the evolution is so gradual that it is hard to point out clearly the **first complication**. Thus, in the *Œdipus Tyrannus* the return of Creon from Delphi is an incident of considerable moment; and in the *Œdipus Coloneus* the entrance of the chorus, and the declaration of the name of Œdipus, are im-

portant points. No part of any play of Sophocles is without progress and movement, and in distinguishing the chief stages we cannot pretend to isolate them. The climax is in one sense continuous. But it also rises in successive waves, and we may note the chief of these, remembering at the same time that each wave has its own climax, not less finely graduated.

4. But we should first mark the **culminating point** of each drama. For in each there is a chief turning-point or "peripeteia," a summit, as it were, to which the emotion mounts, and from which it gradually descends. This in the *Ajax* is the death scene, for which preparation has been made by the alarming announcement of the prophecy of Calchas ; in the *Antigone* the prophecy of Teiresias, followed immediately by the report of its fulfilment, in the *Electra* the second entrance of Orestes ; in the *Tyrannus* the examination of the Theban shepherd, in the *Trachiniæ* the narrative of Hyllus ; in the *Coloneus* the restoration of the children, in the *Philoctetes* the return of Neoptolemus with the bow.

5. The **successive steps** by which the interest of the spectator is heightened and his sympathies intensified, can only be followed by a close perusal, or still better, an intelligent performance, of each play. Although the gradations are clearly marked, their significance cannot be felt apart from the context. But an attentive reader of the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, for example, can hardly fail to perceive how smoothly and steadily the interest is carried onward from the plague to the oracle, from this to the denunciation of the prophet, to the quarrel, the interposition of Jocasta, the coming of the Corinthian ; again, to his partial revelation, not understood by Œdipus, until the two shepherds are confronted, and all the horror is made clear. While the march of events is made thus gradual, how suddenly the truth is flashed upon the minds of the queen and king ! And how vividly the dreadful pathos is stamped upon our hearts by the recital of the messenger and by the reappearance and

passion of *Œdipus*, until a gentler mood steals over us in witnessing his farewell to his children. There is here, combined with the intensity of tragic horror, a consummate harmony, an evenly sustained rise and fall, that is not elsewhere attained, even by Sophocles.

6. The *Antigone* comes next to the *Œdipus Tyrannus* in regularity of structure, although the twofold nature of the action does not admit of an equally unbroken continuity of treatment.

Abstracts of plays are necessarily uninteresting in themselves, but it may be of some use to the reader of Sophocles, if what has been said is here exemplified by a rough sketch of the action of the *Antigone*.

Opening, or prologos.—Antigone declares to Ismene in the grey dawn, her purpose of burying Polynices in defiance of Creon. Ismene vainly expostulates. Antigone goes forth carrying her cruise for the libation, and Ismene, disheartened, retires within.

Entrance of chorus, or parodos.—The Theban elders enter the orchestra, chanting the triumph of Thebes over Argos. They speak briefly of the fratricidal combat of the two princes, rejoice that the war is ended, and await the proclamation of the new king.

Opening continued.—Creon enters to them and declares his policy. To prove his patriotism and public spirit, he forbids the burial of Polynices, who, although his own relative, was a rebel to the state. The elders are surprised, but do not openly remonstrate.

First complication.—One of the watchmen whom Creon had set to prevent the burial, enters suddenly in dismay. **The edict has been violated**, no one knows by whom. The scruples of the chorus make them think that the gods may have themselves interposed. This redoubles Creon's rage at the rebellious act; he suspects the elders of a mutinous spirit, and threatens the watchmen with death and torture if they do not apprehend the malefactor.

First stasimon (p. 79).—The stage is vacant, and the chorus descant on the mysteries of human nature.

How bold and inventive is man ! Happy, if he is not thus tempted to transgress the laws, whether of human or divine obligation !

The **watchman** returns **bringing in Antigone**. Creon enters from the palace, and the watchman describes what he saw. Creon is at first amazed ; but when Antigone avows her deed, his amazement gives way to anger. This is heightened by **her fearless appeal from human laws to the divine**. He threatens death to her and to Ismene, whom he accuses of complicity. The younger sister's perturbation after the proclamation was known to her had not escaped his notice.

Antigone prefers death to further converse with the tyrant. She knows that the people's heart is with her, and that even Eteocles approves her deed, now that he is with those below. **Her part is not with hatred but with love.**

Ismene comes and strives to share the responsibility of what has been done · but vainly, for Antigone rejects her with words of scorn. **Creon** breaks into their colloquy with impatient contempt. Ismene reminds him that it is **his son's betrothed bride whom he would slay**. Thus the bitterness of the situation becomes more evident. The maidens are led into the palace, and Creon remains upon the stage.

Second stasimon.—The chorus sing of the sad fate of the royal house, whose last hope is fading away, and of the infatuation of human passion, which knows not until it touch the fire. They are thinking of Antigone, but will soon have to apply the words to Creon.

Hæmon comes and gently expostulates with his father, who is still convinced of the righteousness of his course. Hæmon not only shows his own love for Antigone, but **makes it felt how her action and her condemnation for it had moved the hearts of the people**. Creon is exasperated and becomes more tyrannical. **Hæmon goes forth in**

ominous silence. Creon declares his purpose more particularly. **Antigone** is to be **immured**.

Third stasimon.—The aged chorus marvel at the power of a love such as Hæmon's, which can transport the soul so as to defy authority. Yet they find themselves almost transported by pity. For

Antigone is brought in guarded, and complains in lyric verse. (**Commos**, or *joint lament*.*) The chorus at first offer barren consolation, but by and by this turns to still more barren reproof. Her complaint is at the loudest when **Creon reappears and hastens the guards**.

Antigone then apostrophises her living tomb, and anticipates her meeting with those that have gone before. **She demands for Creon a doom not worse than hers.**

Fourth stasimon.—As she is finally led away, the chorus sing of the **similar fate of Danae, of Lycurgus, and of Cleopatra**, who were closed from the light of day, whether through their own passionate transgression or the cruelty of others

Unexpectedly, the blind old prophet **Teiresias comes** and tells the truth to Creon. At first, the seer's recital of portents only enrages the king. But by his circumstantial **prophecy** of the personal calamities and the **dangers to the State** which attend upon the act that is all but accomplished, **Creon is struck with sudden conviction**, and hastens forth, if possible, to revoke his deed. At this moment, which is the chief "*peripeteia*," or turning point of the drama, the chorus (in the *fifth stasimon*), at once relieved and anxious, utter a wild prayer to Dionysus to come and save his favourite city from the pollution threatened by the seer.

But all is too late. One of those who had gone forth with Creon reports that Hæmon is dead. At this news **Eurydice**, the wife of Creon, comes from the palace, and **the messenger narrates to her**

* See below, c. viii. p. 86; c. xiii. p. 131.

how, **after first burying Polynices**, they had gone to the vault, where **Antigone had already taken her own life**. Even Hæmon's haste had not prevented this, and he was lamenting over her when his father came. On being entreated to come forth, **Hæmon threatened his father** with his sword. Creon escaped, and the youth **thrust the sword into his own side**. Eurydice goes forth silently; the chorus wonder what this can mean, and the messenger follows her.

Commos.—**Creon enters with the body of Hæmon in his arms**, and laments his fatal error.

His lament is interrupted by the announcement that **Eurydice has taken her own life after cursing him** as the murderer of their two sons, *i.e.* of Hæmon and of Megareus, who had been sacrificed to propitiate the gods when the Argive was at the seven gates.

At this **Creon's lamentation is redoubled**, and **he is led off** in desolation and despair.

7. The remaining five plays must be dismissed more briefly. Like much else in the present work, these skeletons are useless except in conjunction with the study of Sophocles.

AJAX.

1. Opening—Athena reveals to Odysseus, who has followed Ajax to his tent, that her interposition has saved the generals from the fury of the hero. Odysseus is made to witness the humiliation of his rival, and learns a lesson of moderation.
2. Parodos.—The Salaminian followers of Ajax enter the orchestra, expressing their dismay at the rumour that he has slain the cattle. Tecmessa enters and confirms their fear. They all sorrow over his madness. Ajax' voice within shows that he is becoming sane.
3. Ekkyclema (p. 78)—**Ajax discovered** amongst the carcasses of sheep, &c. His lamentation and **threat of suicide**.

4. The appeal of Tecmessa.
5. **Ajax with his boy.**
6. His roughness to Tecmessa
7. His **apparent change of purpose**, softened mood, and exit.
8. The chorus are indulging hopes, when the **messenger reports Calchas' prophecy.**
9. Change of scene. **The dying speech of Ajax. He falls upon his sword.**
10. Second entrance of the chorus. **Cry of Tecmessa.**
11. Arrival of **Teucer.**
12. He sends for Eurysaces.
13. Teucer's lament interrupted by **Menelaus.**
14. Tecmessa returns with the child.
15. Teucer encounters **Agamemnon.**
16. **Odysseus** interposes. Ajax is buried.

ELECTRA.

1. Opening.—Orestes declares his purpose to the Pædagogus and Pylades. Electra is heard within.
2. After the exit of Orestes she enters, making lamentation.
3. The chorus of Argive matrons enter to her, and try to comfort her.
4. She is replying to them, when Chrysothemis appears, and relates the **dream of Clytemnestra.**
5. The chorus chant their reflections on the dream.
6. Entrance of Clytemnestra. Her exasperation and her prayer to Apollo.
7. The false **announcement of Orestes' death.**
8. The effect of this on Clytemnestra and on Electra.
9. Chrysothemis tells the signs of Orestes which she has seen; but is cast down again on hearing the false news.
10. **Despairing resolution of Electra**, and her quarrel with Chrysothemis.

11. **Orestes enters with the urn, over which**
Electra is mourning, when
12. **Orestes discovers himself.**
13. Electra's wild joy.
14. Re-entrance of the Pædagogus.
15. They all enter the palace, while the chorus chant
an ominous strain.
16. Electra reports to them what is passing within.
17. **Clytemnestra's death-shriek.**
18. **Orestes with the bleeding sword.**
19. Ironical reception of Ægisthus.
20. **Orestes shows him Clytemnestra's body,**
and drives him into the palace to be
slain.

TRACHINIÆ.

1. Opening.—Deianira's loneliness and fears for
Heracles. Hyllus goes in search of his father.
2. Parodos.—The chorus of Trachinian maidens
come to sympathise with Deianira.
3. A rustic neighbour announces **the approach of**
Lichas, the forerunner of Heracles.
4. Deianira's sudden joy, blended with compassion
for Iole.
5. **Her hopes are shattered by the report of**
the messenger, which Lichas confirms.
6. Her dissembling speech affects the spectators with
pity for her. She hints at **a gift she in-**
tends for Heracles.
7. In confiding her intentions to the chorus, Deianira
reminds the spectators of **the time when**
she was a bride.
8. She would consult with the maidens ; but on the
entrance of Lichas the irresistible impulse has
its way. **She sends the robe, but hesi-**
tates to send her love.
9. Her description of **the portentous wasting**
of the wool thrills the spectators with
horror.
10. **Hyllus narrates what he has seen, and curses**

his mother, who makes no answer, but goes forth.

11. **Report of Deianira's suicide.**
12. **Heracles is brought in.**
13. His outburst of passion, which Hyllus attempts to soothe.
14. **The sudden change in Heracles** when he knows the truth.
15. **His charge to his son.**

ŒDIPUS COLONEUS.

1. Opening.—**Œdipus** and Antigone before the grove of the Furies.
2. Parodos.—**Entrance of the chorus** of Coloniæ elders.
3. **Œdipus** discovers himself to them, and reveals his name.
4. They at first warn him to depart, but are persuaded to send for **Theseus**.
5. **Ismene** comes with news of the state of things at Thebes.
6. **Œdipus** curses his sons.
7. **Ismene** goes to make an offering, and the chorus question **Œdipus**.
8. **Theseus** comes, and accepts **Œdipus**.
9. The chorus sing their welcome.
10. **Creon** arrives, and at first tries persuasion.
11. This failing, he avows the capture of **Ismene**, and removes **Antigone**.
12. **Œdipus** curses **Creon**, who waxes violent.
13. **Theseus** comes again.
14. **Theseus** goes with **Creon** to find the maidens, and **Œdipus** is left alone.
15. **The children are restored.**
16. **Polynices** comes.
17. **Œdipus** curses his son, who departs, after receiving a promise from **Antigone**.
18. **Thunder and lightning.** **Œdipus** is impatient for **Theseus** to return.

19. **His last charge to Theseus, and exit.**
20. **Report of the messenger,** and re-entrance of Antigone, Ismene, and Theseus.

PHILOCTETES.

1. Opening.—Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus to take Philoctetes by guile.
2. Parodos.—The shipmen of Neoptolemus hear Philoctetes coming.
3. **Impressive entrance of the hero.**
4. He is affected at the sight of Greeks, and asks whence they come; still more affected by the mention of Achilles and of Scyros.
5. He narrates his sufferings.
6. **The lie of Neoptolemus.**
7. Neoptolemus and Philoctetes converse about things at Troy.
8. Neoptolemus affects to be going to Scyros, and **Philoctetes entreats to be taken on board.**
9. His joy when they consent.
10. **The lie of the merchantman** redoubles Philoctetes' eagerness to be gone.
11. **Neoptolemus is allowed to touch the bow.**
12. Philoctetes' attack of pain, and his attempt to stifle it.
13. **The bow is given into Neoptolemus' hand,** and Philoctetes falls asleep.
14. Neoptolemus hesitates.
15. Philoctetes' joy and gratitude on waking to find his friend still there.
16. **Neoptolemus' avowal, and Philoctetes' outburst of rage.**
17. Further hesitation of Neoptolemus.
18. **Entrance of Odysseus,** and fresh outburst of passion on the part of Philoctetes.
19. **Exit of Odysseus and Neoptolemus.**
20. Philoctetes has been for sometime alone with the mariners, when **Neoptolemus returns with the bow.**

21. He still tries to change the mind of Philoctetes.
22. Odysseus reappears, and Philoctetes aims a shaft at him, but is restrained by Neoptolemus.
23. Neoptolemus makes one more attempt to persuade Philoctetes, and then gives up his ambition.
24. They are setting forth for Scyros, when **Heracles** appears in the sky.

CHAPTER VIII.

MODE OF CONSTRUCTION CONTINUED :—CONTRAST—
CONTINUITY AND PERSPECTIVE—“UNITY OF
TIME”—FREEDOM AND VARIETY.

I. *Use of Contrast in Tragedy.*—As the effect of all tragedy depends on some transition from happiness to misery, or, as in the *Philoctetes*, from trouble to joy, it is superfluous to remark that the tragic poet must deal largely in contrast. But it is in his management of the pathetic contrasts which arise from the nature of his subject that much of the poet's skill is shown. In Sophocles every difference of situation or character, from the broadest to the most minute, is so put forth as to contribute its utmost to the main impression.

1. *The chief situation is enhanced by Contrast.*—Antigone dies alone, without sympathy, without a friend. Therefore we are made to feel how close had been the bond of sisterhood between her and Ismene, to what a noble youth she was betrothed—how bright, in fact, was the existence which she casts away.—Œdipus falls from glory to shame; and we are made to see that his was no common glory, but the reward of his own valour and wisdom, graced by well-earned popularity, surrounded by confidence, sweetened by home affections, consoling him for long-past losses.—Ajax is rejected; but we see how he is valued by those who know him.—Electra and Philoctetes are embittered by ill-usage; but of what affection, of what tenderness, are they capable!—Deianira's lot is dark; but how bright it had once been! Nay, how bright it for the moment promises again to be!

The opposition between good and evil is enforced by the **tragic contrast between appearance and reality**. Thus, in Shakespeare, Macbeth, whom Duncan trusts, becomes his murderer; Cordelia, whom Lear renounces, becomes his only stay. In Sophocles this is of course most obvious in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, which turns wholly on a discovery; but it is present more or less in all the plays.

2. *Minor Contrasts. Unconsciousness of the agents.*—The chief masses, both of light and shade, when we look at them attentively, are found to consist of an infinity of touches, every one of which adds something to the richness and harmony of the total effect. Many of these consist of words evincing the speaker's ignorance of an overhanging doom—a form of pathos to which the name of *irony* has been strangely given.* The reader who knows Shakespeare well enough to have felt the force of Othello's "My life upon her faith," and of his "Honest Iago," or of Desdemona's "Jealous? Methinks the sun, where he was born, Drew all such humour from him," will not fail to observe in Sophocles the frequent use of this natural artifice. It is most obvious in those bright choral strains which immediately precede some great calamity: the invocation to Pan in the *Ajax*, that to Dionysus in the *Antigone*, the apostrophe to Citheron in the *Œd. Tyr.*, the brief strain of wild gladness which precedes the entrance of Iole in the *Trachiniæ*.

3. *Other examples of the use of Contrast.*—But, without enlarging here on this particular motive, it may be well to illustrate the general subject of dramatic contrast by adducing a few out of the numberless instances in which the pathos of situations is enhanced by the juxtaposition of opposite impressions.

Take, out of many such effects in the *Œd. Tyr.*, the

* Those who care to pursue this subject will find it especially instructive to observe the subtle manner in which Shakespeare makes Desdemona unconsciously precipitate her own fate. "Everything she says is the most fatal thing she could have said."

reception of the Corinthian messenger's explanation by Œdipus and Jocasta severally. His eager hope of discovery rises to the point of infatuation, while she has fallen suddenly into the uttermost despair. In the *Antigone* the watchman's care for his own comfort and safety sets off the nobleness of the act which he describes. While listening to *Electra*, as she mourns over the urn, the spectator sees visibly in Orestes the joy that is immediately at hand. In the *Trachiniae*, which is full of contrasts, Deianira's own allusion to her bridal comes like a blue rift amidst the clouds that are gathering for an imminent storm. This is a gleam before the darkness, as the despairing resolution of *Electra* is darkness before dawn.

4. *Tragic contrast not all-pervading.*—The reader should be warned, while on this subject, that it is fallacious to look for the same motive everywhere. Presentiment * may sometimes have as fine a tragic effect as unconsciousness. *Antigone* and *Ajax* know full well whither they are going; and when *Deianira* has once seen the portent, there is no more "irony of fate." It is "*the thing she greatly fears*" that "*comes upon*" her.

II. *Continuity.*—It is useless to multiply examples of what is so widely spread as contrast in tragedy. And it is misleading to dwell on separate points, whose excellence is relative to the whole action. That which is most admirable, but impossible to describe in a few words, is the effective harmony of the composition. This cannot be here characterised in full. But we may notice some particular expedients that have assisted in producing unity of impression.

1. In cementing different parts of the action the **minor characters** are often of great moment. This is obviously true of *Teucer* and *Odysseus* in the *Ajax*, of *Hæmon* and *Eurydice* in the *Antigone*, of the old man in the *Electra*, the Theban shepherd in

* Cp. *Hotspur* and *Hamlet* in *Shakespeare*.

the *Tyrannus*, Hyllus in the *Trachiniæ*, Theseus in the *Œd. Col.* In the case of Teucer and of the Theban slave, the interest with which their coming is anticipated is no less remarkable than the skill with which they are employed upon the stage. The importance of Teucer to Ajax, to Tecmessa, and to Eurysaces has been repeatedly present to the spectator's mind. The announcement of his coming is at first a glad relief, until the warning of Calchas has renewed the gloom. And although the full importance of the Theban's evidence is little dreamt of by Œdipus even when the man appears, yet the four different occasions on which he has been mentioned have invested him with a strange fascination for the spectator.

2. In plays like the *Antigone* and *Trachiniæ*, where **two lines of action converge**, it is important to observe the skill with which **they are interwoven**. In the prophecy of Teiresias, and still more in the narrative of the messenger which confirms it, the divers strands are indissolubly joined in one, so that in the tremendous final scene, when Creon is the central object and even wins some share of sympathy, the blows which fall upon him are distinctly felt to be the sequel of Antigone's martyrdom. And even where the death of Eurydice is heaped upon the previous woe, there is no breach of continuity; for the audience have seen her listening to the report of the messenger, and redoubling the pathos of that recital by her present sorrow. As "the sword pierces through her soul" she reads the doom of the tyrant in unmistakable tones. If Antigone is not mentioned again, this is only to complete her isolation.

So in the *Trachiniæ*, though our sympathies are for awhile divided, yet the action is one. It is bound together by the repeated mention of the prophecy in the opening scenes, by the intensity of expectation which makes Heracles, though not yet present, yet a living person of the drama, by our conviction that Deianira's fate is wholly bound up with his, and by the story of Hyllus, bringing the terrible effects of

Deianira's gift to Heracles so vividly before the eye, and told to Deianira herself. Wife, mother, husband, father, son, thus form one fearful group in the very moment when they are eternally separated. This is impressed anew upon us by the description of Deianira's end; and, to increase our pity for her while enhancing the pathos of his sufferings, her husband curses her, and is minded to tear her in pieces, not knowing that she is already dead. The calm that follows when he knows the truth evokes no word of tenderness for her—a sadly truthful touch of nature, which has the effect of leaving our impression of her desolateness unrelieved. Heracles in his last hour provides, not for Deianira's burial, but for the marriage of Iole.

III. The above examples indicate some of the dramatic uses of **narrative** and **prophecy**, in other words of retrospect and anticipation.

1. The narratives in Sophocles are very highly wrought; but no touch in them is merely ornamental. Like all else in his plays they directly promote the action, to which they also add reality and fulness by connecting what is present with what is past or distant. The horizon of interest is thus enlarged so as to include antecedents and surrounding circumstances. As was said before, the antecedents of the action are not formally enumerated in the prologue. They are brought in wherever they can add most to the dramatic effect.

Ajax.—The judgment of the arms is merely alluded to by Athena in l. 41, and not again referred to until it is mentioned by Ajax himself at l. 441.

How Ajax had provoked Athena we are told by the messenger who reports the warning of Calchas, at l. 770.

Of the services of Ajax we are told by Teucer, who reproaches Agamemnon with them, l. 1273.

Antigone.—The fate of Oedipus and Jocasta is briefly recalled by Ismene when she tries to dissuade

Antigone in the opening scene. But Antigone's betrothal to Hæmon only comes out incidentally, where it has the most thrilling effect; and the death of Megareus, which had preceded that of the two brothers, is only alluded to in the report of Eurydice's curse.

Electra.—The action having direct relation to an event of ten years since, this is mentioned in the opening; but the previous history of the death of Iphigenia and its consequences is only spoken of in the altercation between Electra and her mother, and the conduct of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus since the murder is described by Electra to her friends. The chief use of narrative in this drama is to disain the suspicions of the guilty pair by a false account of Orestes' pretended death.

Œdipus Tyrannus.—The antecedent circumstances, so far as Thebes is concerned, here come out one by one. But the main facts of the life of Œdipus, so far as known to him, are told by the king himself to Jocasta at the cardinal moment, when a casual word has called up a train of memories which his recent prosperity had obliterated. The narrative so placed not only gives information which is relevant to the following scenes, but exhibits the character of Œdipus, marks his unconsciousness of the most terrible fact of all, and shows him as flying for consolation to her who will soon have no word for him but "wretched one."

Trachiniae.—Here also from the nature of the plot the antecedents are gradually brought out. The chorus' description of Deianira's bridal, her own account of the meeting with Nessus, and Heracles' mention of the prophecy received by him—not from Apollo, but from his own father Zeus—are all so placed as to be dramatically effective. The mixture of truth and falsehood in the report of Lichas will be noticed at the end of this chapter.

Œdipus Coloneus.—Information as to past facts is given by Ismene, by Œdipus, and by Polynices. In each case it is called forth by a dramatic motive.

Philoctetes.—In the *Philoctetes*, as in the *Electra*, the

chief use of narrative is to deceive. The facts about which the spectator needs information are few and simple, and are told partly by Odysseus to Neoptolemus in persuading him to the deception, partly by Neoptolemus to Philoctetes in his last pleading with him. The recital of Philoctetes himself, in describing his wrongs and sufferings, makes the lie of Neoptolemus more difficult.

The use of narrative gives to each drama a background, which may have various distances, both in time and place. While the scenes represented are for the most part confined to a single spot (to this the *Ajax* is the only exception), the action immediately pertinent to the drama is not so confined, but is going on in several places at once. By means of narrative the separate rays are focussed, the streams are made to converge. The pictures of the greeting between Teucer and Calchas, of Hyllus bending over Deianira's corpse, of Hæmon and Creon at the vault, teach more than any formal moral.~ A narrative may be introduced at any moment where the lines of the action intersect. Good instances are the entrance of the watchman in the *Antigone*, that of Lichas in the *Trachiniæ*, and of Ismene in the *Œdipus Coloneus*.

Each of the chief narratives in Sophocles is a complete dramatic whole, having its own climax and culminating point. See especially the report of the messenger in the *Antigone*. But each contributes essentially to the main action, and stands in just subordination to the chief effect. The tributaries bring their quota to the stream without overflowing their banks.

2. **Prophetic anticipation** is an element in all the plays, and had generally formed part of the original

Cp. Shak. *Merch of V*, 2, 7.

"I saw Bassanio and Antonio part," &c.

legend. The prophecies of Teiresias in the *Antigone* and *Œdipus Tyrannus* are the most directly impressive. In the *Antigone* Creon is suffered to act without warning: the word and the blow come upon him together. Œdipus is warned, but cannot believe the warning. The truth, though clearly told, is too terrible even to be understood. In the *Ajax*, as in the *Antigone*, the prophet's warning comes too late; but in this case is only reported, and not directly heard. The prophecy of Helenus in the *Philoctetes* is alluded to throughout, but is not clearly enunciated till near the end. The action of the *Electra*, *Œd. Tyr.*, *Trach.*, *Œd. Col.*, turns in different ways on the fulfilment of an oracle, which, except in the *Trachinice*, where Heracles consults his father at Dodona, proceeds from the Pythian Apollo. The various oracles and prophecies not only afford links of connection, but add greatly to the depth of the composition.

By these and other means the concentration and isolation of tragic action are sufficiently relieved, and a certain **perspective** is introduced into the scene. The agents appear as human beings, looking before and after, and we learn the extent and magnitude of the issues that turn upon the central crisis.

3. A more vivid means, by which the effect of narrative is sometimes reinforced, is the *ekkyklema* (*i.e.* bringing out on rollers). As the mask, the buskin, and the elevated forehead (*ὄγκος*) of the actor, served the ancient spectator for a perspective glass, so by a convention of the stage he was enabled to witness the effect of what had just been done behind the scene. Thus, in *Aj.*, *Ant.*, *El.*, Ajax amongst the slaughtered sheep, the dead body of Eurydice, and that of Clytemnestra with Orestes standing by, were thrust out on rollers from the central door and drawn in again. Sophocles does not afterwards avail himself of this expedient in the extant plays; and it is ridiculed by Aristophanes.

4. *Level passages*.—The action never comes to a stand: it is promoted even by those passages which

seem most stationary ; but it does not move everywhere with equal speed. Every play has at least one comparatively level passage. As there are points of exceptional intensity, so there are places where the intensity is somewhat relaxed. There is a *systolè* and *diastolè*, an *acceleration* and *retardation* of dramatic movement. In the *stasima* of the chorus, *i.e.* the odes sung by them when already stationed in the orchestra, the drama can hardly be said to have stood still : for these generally give vent to some intense emotion, awakened by the immediate situation. Yet, in the chorus generally, the poet had a means of "perspective," of which he has often availed himself with great skill. And of this the choral odes in the *Trachiniæ* and *Œdipus Coloneus* contain many striking examples.

The point at which the action seems to be retarded depends upon the nature of the plot. Thus, in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, the altercation between the king and Creon forms a kind of table-land, over which the interest is maintained at a certain height before climbing the last steep ascent with *Œdipus* and *Jocasta*. In the *Philoctetes*, the conversation about things at Troy gives opportunity for the familiar intercourse which binds *Philoctetes* to *Neoptolemus*, and also shows the interest felt by *Philoctetes* in his old comrades, and the prolonged lyrical interchange whilst he is alone with the mariners holds us in suspense before the chief crisis. In the *Electra*, where the action is properly accelerated towards the end, the lamentation of *Electra* at her first entrance is carried to great length, the better to reveal her long-enduring sorrow. On the other hand, in the *Trachiniæ*, where the succession of events from the beginning has been unusually rapid, we are made to linger over the last scene between *Hyllus* and his father.

To glance briefly at the remaining plays,—the time of suspense in the *Ajax* is towards the end ; in the *Antigone* and *Œdipus Coloneus*, about the centre (as in the *Œd. Tyr.*) , and it is occupied in each case with a rhetorical altercation—between *Teucer* and the

Atreidæ, between Hæmon and his father, between Œdipus and Creon.

IV. *Unity of Time*.—Some of the preceding remarks lead naturally to the consideration of the “unity of time.”

1. The limits of imaginary time which are found consistent with dramatic illusion are confessedly much narrower in the ancient than in the modern theatre; but the ancient convention was less strict than has been sometimes believed. Were even Sophocles examined in this respect as closely as Shakespeare has been, he could be convicted of many inconsistencies.~ It is not to be supposed that in the more intense passages either the poet or the audience took any account of time: still less that it could be attempted to make what passed upon the stage commensurate with events reported afterwards as simultaneous with it. The action is vaguely imagined as continuous; but, for stage purposes, that is assumed to be continuous which could not really be so. Perhaps where the opening scene is separate from the rest, as in *Aj.*, *Ant.*, *Œd. Tyr.*, a longer than the apparent interval is supposed. Certainly, the chorus in the *Ajax* are already apprised of a rumour that must be considered as subsequent to the opening; and it is not without violence that the action either of the *Ajax* or *Antigone* can be pressed into a single day.

2. For the most part Sophocles evades the difficulty—or rather assists illusion, by using only the most general expressions, such as “then,” “just now,” “all this while,” “soon,” “not long hence,” “by and by,” to indicate relations of time.

3. The poet’s skill in this respect is shown, as has been said, chiefly in the two ways of acceleration and protraction: by creating an appearance of natural continuity which carries on the spectator’s interest in

* See the instructive time-analyses of *Othello* and the *Merchant of Venice*, reprinted by the New Shakespeare Society.

the ideal action without any perceptible break, and by adding so much of relevant circumstance, such intervals of suspense, and such accessories of narrative and prophecy, as may give body and substance to the tale, and to the audience an impression of more than the actual time—as in a dream, where, as Clytemnestra says—

“One sees more than the time of sleep could hold.” *

Thus, in the *Œdipus Coloneus*, where the first coming of Theseus must seem to be delayed, the interval is filled with the arrival and the narrative of Ismene, with the advice of the chorus to Œdipus about the ceremony of lustration, and their importunate questioning of him, with which the noble candour of Theseus is presently to be contrasted. On the other hand, where the recapture of the maidens is to be swiftly achieved, the prince is supposed to follow them as far as to Daphne, to fight with their captors, and to return, while the chorus are chanting six short stanzas.

V. *Freedom and Variety*.—The preceding observations on Sophocles' method of construction have tended to bring out the common features in the structure of the different plays. It is right, therefore, to say a few words, in concluding this subject, on the **freedom** with which the poet has used the traditions and conventions of his art.

1. The proportion of the lyric element to the dialogue is tolerably constant, and may have been partly ruled by practical considerations. But the **arrangement of the functions of the chorus** in different plays is widely different, and can hardly be reduced to rule.

The differences in the *parodos*, or entrance song, have been already noticed.† The number of regular odes, or *stasima*, varies from five to three. The place assigned to the brief, excited strain, called by some

* Æsch., *Agam.*, 894.

† Above, p. 63.

hyporchema, which is only occasionally introduced, is sometimes before the chief crisis, as in the *Ajax*, sometimes, as in the *Antigone*, before the announcement of the catastrophe, while in the *Trachiniæ* it is simultaneous with the first complication.* If it were permissible to enter further here into the classification of lyric strains, distinguishing those which partake of the nature of a pæan or other sacred hymn, and those which come nearer to the Dorian or the Phrygian† mood, the liberal **variety** used by Sophocles would be still more apparent. Lastly, the chief *commos* (or conjoint lament) is very differently placed. In the *Ajax*, where the drama opens with the height of passion, it comes in the first scene after the entrance of the chorus. So, too, in the *Electra*, which begins with feeling and ends with action, the *commatic parodos* (see above, c. vii. p. 69) is greatly prolonged. The motive of the lyric passages near the beginning of *Œd. Col.* and *Phil.* is different from this, and belongs to the "melo-dramatic" cast of these two dramas. The *Antigone* ends with a *commos*, and this is interrupted by the announcement of an important incident, after which it is renewed. The *Œd. Col.* also closes with a long *commos*. In the *Œd. Tyr.*, the *commos* comes between the announcement of the catastrophe and the final scene; in the *Philoctetes*, before the turning point of the play. And in the *Antigone*, the beautiful lament of the heroine is similarly placed before the culminating point. There is no elaborate *commos* in the *Trachiniæ*. But Heracles sometimes breaks into lyric utterance, and his entrance is preceded by a half lyrical passage, in which the several choreutæ interrogate the nurse who has reported to them Deianira's suicide.

2. The same freedom appears in the use of the **messenger**. In the *Antigone*, *Œd. Tyr.*, and *Œd. Col.*, the crowning events are reported by one of the

* See above, c. 7, p. 64.

† According to the anonymous *Life*, the Phrygian mood was first introduced into tragedy by Sophocles.

attendants who have followed the chief persons to the end. So the death of Deianira is announced by the nurse; but the calamity of Heracles is announced by Hyllus, and what follows this is done upon the stage, until the hero is borne away to the pyre. In the *Ajax*, the use of the messenger is only to prepare us for the crowning scene, and to announce the coming of Teucer. In the *Electra* and *Philoctetes* also the spectators are the immediate witnesses of the main events, and the place of the messenger is taken by the Pædagogus and the pretended merchantman with their fictitious tales. The propriety of this is strikingly obvious in the *Electra*, where the end, which has been seen from the beginning, is not meant to excite wonder or pity, but to make us tremble at the sharp stroke of retributive justice. Electra coming forth to tell how Clytemnestra decks the urn for burial with Orestes standing near; Orestes himself entering with the bleeding sword after his mother's cry; Clytemnestra's body rolled forth by the *ekkyklema*; these, and the final exit of Ægisthus, present the terror of the event more vividly than could have been done by the report of a messenger. In the *Philoctetes*, the apparition of Heracles with his prophecy of success takes the place of the more ordinary announcement of the catastrophe.

3. It remains to notice one more point that is of some importance in the management of the fable. We saw in the last chapter how Sophocles selects from existing forms of a story the one best suited to his purpose, and even modifies particular circumstances with a view to his plot. He has also **availed himself of those versions of a legend which he rejects**. For his complex drama it was desirable that there should be misunderstandings, deceptions, contradictory points of view; and the variations of tradition supplied convenient means for producing this result. Odysseus in the *Ajax* is cool and calculating, indeed, but essentially noble, as in the *Odyssey*. Teucer at last acknowledges no less. But a very

different view of him is held by the chorus, by Tecmessa, and by Ajax himself. And this meaner conception of Odysseus, which appears often in tragedy, had probably been countenanced by the cyclic poets. The same may be said of the different aspects in which Athena is regarded by Odysseus on the one hand, and by Ajax and Tecmessa on the other. In the *Philoctetes*, the merchantman tells falsely that Diomed has set forth with Odysseus to bring in Philoctetes. And this was really one form of the legend. Œdipus was in some accounts the real and not the supposititious son of Polybus. Orestes sojourned in Phocis, according to some, with Strophius, according to others, with Phanoteus. In Sophocles he lives with Strophius, Agamemnon's friend; but the false message about him purports to come from Phanoteus, who is the war-friend of Ægisthus. In the *Trachiniæ* the sacking of Œchalia is falsely connected by Lichas with the bondage to Omphale, which he represents as having been occasioned by the death of Iphitus. This was probably an existing version of the story.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PERSONS—AJAX, ŒDIPUS, PHILOCTETES,
NEOPTOLEMUS.

THE action of a Sophoclean drama is always concentrated in the **crisis of an individual destiny**. That which absorbs us in seeing the *Prometheus* or the *Eumenides* is the pageant of a superhuman conflict in which great principles are impersonated, a struggle whose mysterious issues affect a whole people, or the whole race of man. The persons impress and interest us profoundly, but our feeling for them is not exclusive. From beginning to end of the *Œdipus Tyrannus* or the *Trachiniæ* we are engrossed by personal sympathy. Euripides, on the other hand, may often excite sympathy for individuals, but—not to mention the subordination of character to incident, which is so common with him—he frequently enlists our chief interest for some one who is in no sense the hero or heroine of the story. In Sophocles the interest always centres **either in one person, or in two whose destinies are inseparable**. Round these the other characters revolve, and are more or less prominent in relation to them.

In dramatising his fable the poet carried with him the most vivid conception of the chief agents. It is sometimes said that the persons of ancient tragedy are typical, not individual. As applied to Sophocles, this remark is apt to be misleading. If it is meant that Ajax, whom we see only at a decisive moment, presents fewer traits to us than Macbeth, whom we

follow through half his lifetime ; that Deianira's character has less of range than Cleopatra's ; the statement is incontrovertible. But if it were understood to mean that Ajax or Deianira has not, as much as any of Shakespeare's creations, that indefinable something which in a fictitious being conveys the impression of living personality, and gives the world assurance of a man or woman, this would be unfair to Sophocles. For his men and women are individual and most real. They may not be highly coloured, but each one of them is a full and rounded whole, not a shadow upon a surface, nor of that bisected *basso-relievo* make to which the Zeus of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (p. 190) threatens to reduce humanity. Though they pass before us swiftly we see plainly whence they come and whither they are going.

The conception of the principal characters was inseparable from that of the plot. Having felt the main situation, Sophocles realised what the persons must be, if the situation was to command universal sympathy.

It may be said of his protagonists that they are all impassioned, and that they have all a keen sense of personal honour. The first thought of the men is their country, the first thought of the women is their kindred. But if we would know more of them than is implied in this general description, they must be considered one by one.

The character of AJAX is indicated partly through what others say of him, and partly through his own words and bearing. The poet's aim has been to disclose the kernel within the husk, the true heart beneath the rugged breast.

The world sees in Ajax only the traditional Homeric outlines of the burly soldier,

“ Rude in speech
And little blest with the soft phrase of peace.”

His rugged perverseness, his untameable self-will, had become a proverb no less than his tall stature, his broad shoulders, and his massive shield. And when he left his father's house he brought along with him an overweening self-confidence which was his ruin. For his pride rejected even the proffered aid of Athena. Therefore the gods frowned upon him for a time.

His prowess was unquestioned, and in valour he was acknowledged to be second only to Achilles. But, as compared with Odysseus, he was supposed to be slow in counsel. Athena, however, declares, and Odysseus does not deny, that Ajax was not only prompt in action, but practically far-seeing. And, when his rage is past, the spectator finds him so. Sophocles shows us this man's behaviour under the sudden stroke of an irremediable misfortune.

In the impression which the calamity makes on those surrounding him, we see first of all what he has been to them. In spite of his rough ways, of which they are rather proud, he is the defence and shield of the Salaminian mariners, the only stay of Tecmessa and his infant son. The relation of his brother to him reminds us of the Homeric lines which describe Teucer after discharging his shaft, as returning beneath the ox-hide shield "like a child taking refuge with his mother."

In the first utterances of the hero on coming to himself, we see the depth of the heart that has been wounded.

The hopes with which he came to Troy, and which he cherished partly for his parents' sake, have vanished, never to return. When he first appears before us, he is fully conscious of his position, and foresees what he must do; but his passion is still working, the rage in him is not yet spent. In his farewell to his son, and the charge which he gives to the mariners, the far-reaching, commanding spirit of Ajax is for the first time seen. But the old roughness again comes over him when urged by Tecmessa.

The question was raised by Welcker, how far Ajax is dissembling in the great speech, beginning—

“What thought doth never-limitable time
Being not to light, what hide not from the day?”

That it was contrary to Ajax' character to dissemble is part of the pathos of the situation, and also makes it more natural that Tecmessa and the mariners should be deceived. The passion of suicide—let native character be what it will—instinctively finds sufficient means for eluding or obviating prevention, as Sophocles well knew. But just as Deianira's dissembling speech is one of those which most reveals to the spectator her true disposition, so this of Ajax conveys several indications of a real change of mood. His calm contemplation of the necessity of the case, so different from his fierce resentment against Athena ; his true-hearted sorrow at leaving Tecmessa unprotected, notwithstanding his late harshness to her ; his interpretation of that which he means to do as an act of self-purgation and avoidance of divine wrath, are all profoundly real. That by submission to the Atridæ he means his departure to a place whence he may curse them, that even in submitting to the gods he does not wholly relinquish the attitude of self-reliance, is shown in his final speech, where the last veil is taken from the heroic soul. There he makes demand of Zeus as of a kinsman, and we know that his demand is fulfilled. He speaks with open face to the swift Sun ; to Hermes and to Death as those who will befriend him, and not blame. He thinks of his father, and dwells for a moment upon his mother's grief ; but only for a moment, lest it should make him falter. His heart expands to Salamis, to his own hearth, to the forms of nature that have surrounded him for ten years at Troy. He has no remorse, for he knows that the act he meditates will pay all debts, but he invokes the Erinyes against the Achæans.

The Athenian spectator might well see in Ajax one who had wiped out his evil by his good, whose

worst crime was to have loved honour too dearly; and a deeper feeling than that of loyalty to a patron might lead them to demand just honours for his shade. He had already achieved much, but his last act had for the first time given proof of the essential grandeur of his personality. His perishing in the dew of his youth is like the eclipse of a star,

“ Whose worth’s unknown although his height be taken,”

and we wait breathlessly until the name that has been overclouded is seen to shine forth with renewed lustre. This rejoices us the more, because we have been made to feel that his error arose not from weak passionateness, but from the irrepressible outburst of a strong and tender nature that had been frustrated in its worthiest aim. The true ground of his character is seen to be an indomitable force of will. And his pride is not the mere defiant bluntness of the Homeric warrior, but the deeply-rooted self-esteem of one who is conscious of unrealised possibilities, but has not fully learned to measure himself with other men.

We have seen how the pathos of the fate of *ŒDIPUS* is heightened by the splendour of his position. It is also deepened by the impression given of his character, which contrasts with, while it partly accounts for, his fall.

Ajax was one who, in the words of Milton (*Sams. Agon.*, 523, foll.), being

“ great in hopes
With youthful courage and magnanimous thought . . .
Full of divine instinct, after some proof
Of acts indeed heroic ” . . . was “ swollen with pride. ”

But *Œdipus* has reached his meridian, and is crowned with maturity. He has reaped the fruits of boldness and wisdom in a royal marriage with fair issue, and in a prosperous reign. Having once saved Thebes by the solution of the Sphinx’s riddle, he is supposed by himself and others to be the possessor

of a gift of penetration all but superhuman. No man can suggest to him an expedient that he has not thought of. He is unfailing in resource. And his intellectual powers are wielded with an integrity of benevolence and public spirit that is beyond suspicion.* He is generous and disinterested to the last degree. Nay, his affection for the people who have adopted him even surpasses the natural bond of a true-born Cadmean sovereign. They are his children for whom he wakes and watches, whose trouble touches him more nearly than his own. Such is Œdipus in prosperity, and so he still appears when the first stroke of calamity has fallen.

Yet, under this smooth outside, unsuspected by all around him, totally forgotten by himself, lies the fatality of an impetuous temper, the burden of an unsolved mystery.

(1) The passionateness of Œdipus (which the rash mood of the aged Laius leads us to think of as inherited) is not, like that of Ajax, the outcome of a deeply-rooted inflexible will. He is carried off by impulses, each of which possesses him entirely, until it is supplanted by another. He is clear-sighted so long as passion slumbers, but, once roused, "his blood begins his safer guides to rule." There is in him something dangerous, for which wisdom may well fear.

It is on the whole a generous impulsiveness, of the kind that makes men interesting to their fellows, and gives them an influence that is unquestioned while it lasts; a character the very opposite of calculating self-interest and petty circumspection, but one that has a precarious hold upon success.

This appears in Œdipus, first, in the profound impression made upon him by a drunken word; then in his going suddenly and secretly, without consulting anyone, to Delphi. Then, instead of reflecting on the oracle which he there receives, or comparing it with

* Œdipus sometimes reminds us of Pericles, whose personal disappointments Sophocles witnessed, and who was cut off by the plague. But he has not the firmness of the Athenian statesman.

the word that before had troubled him, he is impelled by it to leave Corinth for ever. The same reckless impetuosity, aggravated by the bitterness of his heart, accounts for the sudden blow which vacates for him the throne of Thebes. Coming thither as a homeless stranger, he undertakes the desperate adventure which wins the kingdom for him ; and in the triumph of the moment, wafted into such a haven by a prosperous gale, he forgets the past, thinks no more of Corinth, and lightly accepts the responsibilities of a ruined people and the hand of the widowed queen.

When the plague comes, before anyone else has thought of it he has sent to Delphi, and on the first mention of Teiresias he sends twice for him. On Creon's return he will not wait to hear the oracle apart, and, on hearing it, at once undertakes the whole burden of the quest. His impatience at the silence of Teiresias ; his blind outburst when the prophet has spoken—and Œdipus is too angry even to understand him ; his sudden suspicion of Creon, in whom he had hitherto placed absolute trust ; his impulsiveness in turning from Creon to the elders, and from the elders to Jocasta ; the revulsion of feeling that follows her mention of the cross-road ; again, the rebound of triumph when he hears that Polybus is dead, and he is to be King of Corinth without having slain his supposed father—all are in keeping with the same trait of character. Again, when under the influence of these tidings Laus has been almost forgotten, and the Corinthian holds forth the hope of untravelling the secret of his birth, how completely the revival of this first impulse supplants the former one, "as fire drives out fire," until both together suddenly touch their goal ! Then the new impulse of Œdipus, no less sudden, no less complete, than any that had preceded, and as impetuously carried into act, is to leave once for all the light of day. And when all is dark and comfortless, his passion is not spent, but he is just as eager to be cast forth from Thebes as once he had been to take the way from Corinth.

(2) The generous impulsiveness of Œdipus is combined in him with a high sense of honour, the tenderest point in which concerns the integrity of family ties. Though surrounded with affection and esteem at Corinth, and the presumptive heir of a kingdom, where the reigning monarch was already old, he could not rest while any doubt was cast upon his birth. He would rather be the real son of poor, perhaps servile, parents, whom he had never seen, than be the adopted successor to a throne. What then was the horror of this pure young spirit when Phoebus disclosed to him the relation in which he should one day stand to his father and mother, concerning whose identity the oracle seemed to have no doubt !

Such were the motives of his flight. And it is to this same heart, unsullied by one base action—for to have slain a stranger who insulted him was no crime—that the horror of the discovery comes. This aspect of the character of Œdipus contributes greatly to the tragic effect.

His affectionateness to his wife and children belongs to the same part of his nature and produces a similar result. It is a touching instance of it that even after his fall, though he will not name Jocasta, he is careful to give Creon charge concerning her burial.

The ŒDIPUS AT COLONUS is a different figure, but still retains some lineaments of the Theban King. There is the same affectionateness, only brightened by affliction. There is the same clinging to integrity ; but this is now transformed into a profound assurance of the acceptableness of pure intentions even where all worldly relations have been destroyed. The old fire, too, is latent under the embers of a ruined life, and flashes forth anew when "much enforced." Sophocles could not forget that his "King Œdipus" had been one of his master-works. But he would not have us enquire too curiously whether the second Œdipus is the same man with the first. The person is altered, not with psychological reference to his

former production, but with a view to the impression which he now desires to create.

This Œdipus is one to whom a great sorrow has become a great possession, who has long since expiated by suffering the tragic consequences of well-meaning rashness, who is looking forward calmly to the peace which the gods have promised to him. He is indignant at the perversity of his countrymen, and surprised at the superstition of the Coloniates, who refuse one whom the gods have long since accepted, and still hold him as reprobate on account of a long-past involuntary crime. But his indignation is tempered with the caution of age, and with the timidity caused by frequent rebuffs. In responding to the princeliness of Theseus he not only recalls his princely dignity, but assumes "something of prophetic strain." Only in the altercation with Creon a touch of senile querulousness is mingled with his former impetuosity; and both here, and in the old man's attitude to Polynices, Sophocles has portrayed, as in his *Philoctetes* and *Electra*, the bitterness of resentment passing into an *idée fixe*, which no effort of persuasion or reasoning can dislodge.

It is a noteworthy instance of the "disinterested objectivity" of the poet's art that, being himself of an exceptionally elastic nature, he has repeatedly dwelt on the condition of a mind on which suffering has left an unalterable stamp.

The action of the *PHILOCTETES* turns upon the hero's obstinate determination never to rejoin the army at Troy. This is accounted for chiefly by his sense of wrong, which, piercing far more deeply than any physical pain, has entered like iron into his soul, and has formed there a fixed idea amounting almost to monomania, which nothing but the sovran voice of the deified Heracles, whom he had so loved on earth, could for a moment loosen. This obduracy of resentment, and the perseverance in it even when promised an honourable return, and in spite of lonely

sufferings which none but a heart of steel could endure—however it may seem to us, who have been “gospelled”—was to the Greeks a proof of the most noble heroism. Unutterable pain, in loneliness amidst hardships, the extremes of hunger, thirst, cold, heat, are all borne firmly by Philoctetes, but *not tamely*. The unkindness of nature becomes to him, as to King Lear, the symbol of human wrong—as it were, a perpetual sacrament of hatred. Every throb of disease brands afresh upon his heart the cruelty of the Atridæ and of Odysseus, and leaves the solitary man more obdurate against the thought of reconciliation or return.

But, together with this keen vindictiveness in one direction, there is an ever-springing fountain of love within him, which like his hatred has not been quenched but deepened by distress and solitude. The ten years have not abated, but only intensified, his longing for Hellas and for his home. Ambition is dead within him, or rather has been transformed to indignation; but affection is all the more alive. It is this which, added to his grand power of endurance, has enabled him to bear intense pain in a desert land for all those years and still to be a human being. Personally disabled, and providing for his barest wants with the single help of his bow, he has still kept life afoot in the vague hope, already often frustrated, that some chance mariner, forced by stress of weather to that inhospitable shore, might one day yield to his entreaties, and take him home to his father's house, though he could not but fear that his father was perhaps no more.

Nor had this hope deferred, with pain and just resentment eating like a canker, by any means dulled this heroic soul to kindlier influences from without. It is this, above all, which makes it morally impossible for Neoptolemus to carry out his scheme of deception. Philoctetes “taxes not the elements with unkindness.” His affections, when shut off from human objects, cling fondly to his “homeless habitation,” to the roar

of the waves, to the green margin of the neighbouring fountains. He even feels a pang at leaving them, as Ajax has a tender farewell for the Scamander. His bow, which is his only means of sustenance, is also the record of the one great friendship of his life, a friendship which he had won by doing kindnesses. The very sight of Greek raiment affects him to tears; and when one comes, the son of an old comrade who had been injured like himself, a youth whose ingenuous countenance and winning manners disarm the natural suspicion of the wronged hero, the old tendency to believe in mankind, the frank heart of instinctive trust, returns in all its freshness; and in seeing him again deceived we are enabled to measure the depth of the wound which wrong has made in him, by the generous openness of a nature which must originally have placed a boundless confidence in the good faith of mankind.

Only when the heart thus opened anew has been anew betrayed, when his reliance on Neoptolemus' transparent looks has been stultified, do we find him utterly renouncing fellowship with men, and turning for final comfort to the hard embrace of Nature—"to be a comrade with the wolf and owl."

Yet once again, when the young man has given clear proof that his friendship was after all sincere, and that he had only yielded temporarily to the influence of a more crafty mind, the hero's strong resentment vanishes and leaves no trace, and we see them setting forth hand in hand.

The destiny of Philoctetes is inseparable from that of NEOPTOLEMUS, in whom the spectator has a not inferior interest. In speaking of the protagonists of Sophocles, we can hardly leave out the figure of this boy-hero, in whom the Greek love of youthful manhood might find its purest object. None of Plato's striplings is so admirable. Phædrus is not more interesting, and even Theætetus and Glaucon are less noble. He is a possessor of that "divine

nature" which Plato, no less than Sophocles,* confesses to be better than philosophy.

He at first starts back in horror from the suggestion of deceit. The son of Achilles, who "hated liars like hell," cannot stoop to crooked policy. His pride and native goodness are equally revolted by the thought. But when it is put to him with consummate clearness that thus and thus only can his life be crowned with success, that in this way and this alone can Troy be taken, it seems for the time as if a generous and public-spirited ambition had prevailed against the gentler dictates of his heart. And having once undertaken to deal with stratagem, he shows all the resource and cunning of a true Greek. If he fails to carry his purpose to its end, this is not for want of ability—the spectator sees clearly that he could have succeeded if he would. But he is met by difficulties of a kind on which he had not reckoned when he made the agreement with Odysseus. The condition of Philoctetes moves his pity more and more. And, as we have seen, this effect is greatly enhanced by the character of the man whom he has undertaken to deceive. Where he had looked for nothing but suspicion, he is met with the most touching confidence, with an unreserved reliance which becomes increasingly embarrassing to him, as he finds himself becoming all in all to the man whom he is entrapping, from whom his dissembling promises evoke the most lively gratitude. What is he to do?

At last when he has taken the bow, the cry of confession bursts from him. And the angry outburst of his victim, by showing the depth of the soul which he has decoyed, quickens his remorse tenfold. But he still hopes that Philoctetes may be persuaded to come of his own accord, and in this hope he lingers until compelled by Odysseus to depart. Then, when his triumph is practically secure, he is seized with a

* "A candid soul, on righteous thoughts intent,
Finds truth that foils the power of argument."

Soph., *Fragm.*

conviction of the impossibility of taking it in this way, and, borne off by a moral impulse as irresistible as to lower natures might be the merest physical necessity, he rushes back to Philoctetes and restores the bow. In representing him as once more attempting to persuade Philoctetes, Sophocles reminds us, as in the case of Deianira and the Trachinian maidens, that the bitter experience of middle life is happily a sealed book to fresh young souls.

Thus in the heroes of his extant plays Sophocles presents five "ages of man,"—the boy, the full-grown warrior, the established ruler, the afflicted solitary, the time-worn wanderer whose end is peace.

CHAPTER X.

THE PERSONS—ANTIGONE, ELECTRA, DEIANIRA.

THE HEROINES also represent divers conditions : the betrothed maiden cut off in the flower of her age, the daughter of an afflicted house long withering on the stem, the much-tried wife and mother.

ANTIGONE is the Virgin Martyr of Greek life. A consuming love for her kindred is combined in her with a fiery zeal for the religious duty of caring for the dead. Her nature is affectionate to the core. But affection is with her no mere passive fondness. It is an inextinguishable principle of action. Like her father, she obeys impetuously the dictates of the ruling motive, "in the scorn of consequence," but, unlike him, she knows what she is doing.

Had her house been spared the last fatality of the death of Polynices as a rebel, and the decree which followed it, she would have been the glad mother, under new auspices, of a royal line. We may even believe that in the hopes attending on her betrothal to Hæmon, the remembrance of her father's sorrows had been somewhat softened. The people of Thebes, at least, regarded her as the one green shoot upon a blasted tree. But now the whole dark train of evil memories is revived, and she sees clearly, however weaker natures may blind themselves, that Zeus intends no earthly joy for her. Instead of blossoming in marriage, she must act and she must suffer. Her purpose is formed suddenly, passionately, irrevocably,

and is instantaneously carried out. The motives of affection and piety are reinforced, not by hatred, which is foreign to her nature, but by indignation and scorn. She had never been understood by Creon, her uncle and guardian, to whom she had a natural antipathy, and whom she denounces from the moment of the edict as an enemy of her house. For in her apprehension, not Polynices only, but Eteocles also, is outraged by the decree. The tie of blood survives the arbitrement of their hatred.

Those who, like the Theban elders, are offended by the strain of harshness in Antigone (which, like the rougher moods of Hamlet, is less the fault of nature than of circumstance) can hardly have observed how entirely this is due to the strength of her affections. Her father died an outlaw, her mother was shamed; they have left a stain upon their offspring. All this she knows. But her heart is with them in the grave. Her brother dies a rebel to his country; but she sees in him only her brother. When condemned to death for sprinkling the dust on him, she grieves not, because she is going from those who outrage natural pieties, to be with those whom she so loves. The love which prompted her to defy the public law is a mystery to herself; but she is confident that the law which she has observed, the law which bids humanity respect the dead, is infinitely higher than the decree of yesterday, which she has violated. And this confidence she holds fast, though she is left alone. Antigone's belief in an invisible internal world, where those whom death has separated shall meet again, is as strong as that of any other martyr. But she is not insensible to the brightness which she relinquishes:—the light of the sun, a bride's, a mother's happiness, she estimates at their full worth. And when the impetuous act and the defiant avowal have brought their inevitable result, we see that, while there is no weakness, there is no want of tenderness in Antigone. Nor is her lofty ardour unaccompanied with the more human feeling of contempt for the mean race of those who are sending the last true

Cadmean princess to her doom. Her roughness to Ismene, whom at the opening she lovingly acknowledged as her sister, is, like that of Ajax to Tecmessa, not inconsistent with affection. She will not involve her sister in her own fate. If she once mentions Hæmon, it is characteristically to vindicate him from dishonour. We feel, on hearing those few words, what a perfect wife she would have made.

The same resolute impetuosity that makes her defy Creon, appears in her last act of all, that of strangling herself in the living tomb.

ANTIGONE in *Æd. Tyr.* and *Æd. Col.*—Before parting from Antigone we may touch for a moment on her re-appearances in the *Ædipus Tyrannus* and *Ædipus Coloneus*.

(1) *Æd. Tyr.* After the discovery, before Ædipus is led away, he is allowed by Creon to embrace his infant daughters. Already they are preferred in his affection before his sons, whom he leaves, without misgiving, to fight their way in life. The girls have been fed at his table, and have been the objects of an unusual fondness. And now he fears that they will be outcasts for his sake. But he commits their future to the care of Creon.

(2) In the *Coloneus*, although not yet of a marriageable age, Antigone is old and strong enough to do good service as her father's guide. She has joined him as soon as she was able, and has never left him. Her faithfulness and moral fearlessness already show themselves, and they are combined in her with a sort of childish tact, by which she wins the elders to listen to Ædipus, and induces Ædipus to listen to his son. In her plea for Polynices, we see clearly how she makes all else go down before the claims of kindred. And in her brother's last request to her we have a distinct indication of the pride which the old poet took in his early masterpiece.

ELECTRA is the heroine of endurance, and may be

contrasted with Antigone, as Philoctetes with Ajax. For Paganism also has its "passive virtues," although they are not those of meekness and humility.

Electra lives for two purposes, or rather for one only, to vindicate her father and to see her brother established as his heir. She is profoundly embittered, but her bitterness, like Antigone's harshness, springs out of the depth and constancy of her affection. To persevere in just resentment is held by Sophocles to be a proof of nobleness, and one that is even more to be admired in a woman, who has to contend with her natural weakness, and is angry, not for her own wrongs, but for another's. A trifling concession, the dissimulation of an obsequious silence, would have obtained for Electra, as for Chrysothemis, the position of a luxurious princess in Ægisthus' court. But she will not so far forget her father. Until he is righted, she will continue to mourn for him, although for this she is degraded to the condition of a slave, and kept on prison-fare. This course she deliberately prefers. Each instance of her mother's and Ægisthus' cruelty she treasures up as a new claim against them on behalf of her sire. This "obstinate condolence" is not the only crime for which she is suspected by them. At the time of her father's murder she had shown her promptitude and presence of mind by sending her brother, a child of ten years old, to the care of Strophius, her father's friend, with one faithful attendant, whom she charged to instruct the boy as to his duty and his wrongs. Nor have her active powers been idle, even while they seemed to pine for lack of opportunity. Ever brooding on the hope that Orestes, grown to manhood, would return and avenge the murdered king, she has done her utmost to keep alive this purpose in him by secret messages. And now her hope is almost spent, and she is threatened with immurement, when in the dream of Clytemnestra a ray of encouragement supervenes. When this is utterly extinguished, and she has appealed in vain to Chrysothemis to second her attempt, she declares her

resolution, all alone and with her single hand, to assassinate (not her mother, but) Ægisthus. Her own life is crushed (and, like Antigone, she feels the worth of what she has sacrificed), but her resolution is unbroken. And if the spectator has begun to think that the heroine's strength is, after all, a sort of hardness, he is undeceived in the recognition scene. The long-pent up tenderness there bursts forth so vehemently as, both in the mourning and in the revulsion of gladness, to become almost inarticulate. The incoherence of ecstatic fondness has nowhere been more finely rendered.

It has been thought a blot upon Electra that she has no "compunctious visitings of nature" in the moment of her mother's death. Sophocles has not shrunk from showing us that to any such feeling she had become wholly impenetrable. The contrast between affection and vindictiveness is absolute, and it may be said, indeed, that the one is the measure of the other. It is the thought of her father that absorbs her wholly; the desire of vengeance for him has become a second nature. Clytemnestra was for a moment softened when she heard that her son was dead. Electra never softens for an instant towards her mother. She may be said to press the sword of Orestes home.

Sophocles may have had two reasons for what is apt to offend modern readers—especially in an age when our Hamlet cannot throw down a skull, or even say "How abhorred in my imagination it is!" nor cry out, "I loved Ophelia," without burying his head in his aunt-mother's bosom.

(1) To make either Electra or Orestes falter in their act would have been inconsistent with the motive of the play, which is to represent the return of Orestes as a Day of Judgment, in which the express command of Phœbus is unflinchingly fulfilled, and not, as in the *Choephoræ*, to dwell on the horror of the matricide, and so to prepare the way for the *Eumenides*. The doom of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus is in Sophocles a

“ Judgment of the Heavens, which makes us tremble,” but “ touches us not with pity.”

(2) It would have been inconsistent with the situation and character of Electra.

“ *Servetur ad imum
Qualis ab incepto.*”

The righteous indignation for her father which she has nursed with life-long vigilance, until his Erinys has become impersonated in her, is about to find its crowning satisfaction. The dark obstructive shadow upon the hearth is to be swept away. Her feelings, which have been drawn into one channel and shut up there, are suddenly let loose. The floodgate is removed, and it is no wonder if the stream flows violently. This exuberance of hatred only comes from her in the presence of her brother, by which all her emotions have been raised to the height. When left alone, she did not herself “ contrive against her mother aught.” Only when the Avenger is come, in the exultation of the moment she cries out, “ Give a second stroke, if thou hast power.” Sophocles has here, as elsewhere, exemplified the force of a fixed and dominant idea. And in the delineation of a female character this is peculiarly in place. It is not Lady Macbeth who suffers at the time of action from “ compunctious visitings.” If the modern poet shows us also the reaction, the price paid for the effort, he is privileged in this by the wider scope and range of his art.

DEIANIRA is the all-too-loving wife, the Imogen amongst the women of Sophocles.

She has left her father's house for Heracles, and his rash act in slaying Iphitus has forfeited her second home. Her life at Trachis has been one long winter with but rare glimpses of the sun. She is worn, not only by his absence, but by constant anxiety for his safety. Her love for him has never wavered. Its very strength instructs her to make allowance for his changeful loves, even while she feels their indignity.

It is by speaking of Heracles that the wily Centaur secures her ear. Not in this way only, but in others, she is a true woman. Her native bounteousness of disposition is shown (1) in her pity for the dying Centaur (who had wronged her, but was dying for her); (2) in her compassion for Iole, at the very moment of her own great joy. The witchery of her beauty is shown by the sin of Nessus, and by Heracles' involuntary reminiscence of her "crafty eye"; the fascination of her character by the friendship of the Trachinian maidens, amongst whom she is a stranger, and by the manner of Lichas to her; her kindness of heart by her sorrow at parting from her household. Even the mute surroundings of her quiet industrious life have a share of her love.

But this tender and delicate being is not spiritless.* There is a wrong which she cannot brook, even though she cannot be angry with her lord. To be supplanted, not only in his affections for a while, but in her place by the hearth, by a new bride, is what no woman, Deianira thinks, could bear. It is not in her nature to contrive harm, either against Heracles or the woman who has won her pity. But she bethinks her of the Centaur's gift. If even by this doubtful means she can regain her rightful place, and win the goal from youth!—Can any one, man or woman, blame her error?

Deianira acts impulsively, and is unconscious of the strength of her own impulses. When Nessus tells her on her bridal journey of a means for securing Heracles' love, his words, to which she lends an unsuspecting ear, impress her more deeply than she knows at the time; and after she has anointed the robe, she thinks, as she brings it forth, that if a sufficient reason were given she could desist. But when the gift is gone, and on entering the house she sees the wasting of the wool, the "sufficient reason" instantly occurs to her own mind.

The depth of her "tender-hefted" nature, which

* Cf. Desdemona and Imogen.

could bear all things except the loss of love, is shown by the silence with which she receives the curse of her son. "If you do not love me, I will not love myself."

She is forgiven, though she knows not of it. But the wandering affection of Heracles has left her, never to return.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PERSONS:—HERACLES—HYLLUS; ORESTES—ÆGISTHUS; CREON—TEIRESIAS—HÆMON; ODYSSEUS—TEUCER—AGAMEMNON—MENELAUS; THESEUS.

HERACLES.—In concentrating our sympathies on Deianira, the poet seems to have felt that Heracles alone could hardly be the protagonist of a tragedy.* The great beneficent hero is too defective in the finer emotions to rank with Ajax, Œdipus, Philoctetes. We accept him less for what he is than for what he has done, and because Deianira has accepted him. Sophocles is well aware of the pathos which attends the breaking of a great life through love; but he does not choose to place this in the foreground. And in nothing has he more shown the depth of his humanity than in his preference for a situation which poets have too much neglected—that of a forsaken wife.

Heracles is to be hereafter glorified and freed from stains of earth. He is to receive the pure renown which his labours for mankind have merited. But for the tragic purpose of the *Trachiniæ* this bright side of his destiny is kept out of view. The action ends with the mention of his (purifying) funeral pyre. For the present we see in him only the “noble ruin of” the “magic” of love. The stupendous achievements which he himself recalls, his long course of grand ad-

* *Heracles at Tænarus* is the title of one of the satyric dramas. See above, p 40.

venture which had blessed the world, only make it the more pitiable that for a casual fancy he should have slain a man by guile, subjected himself to bondage, destroyed an unoffending though proud city, and bereft the object of his passion of her father and her home—above all that he should unknowingly have wrought his own ruin and that of his true-hearted consort by giving occasion to the lustful Centaur whom he slew to lay a “dead hand” upon them. This happens, not merely because it was in the counsels of Fate, but because the new love provokes the Nemesis of the old, which lives on in Deianira though it is dead in Heracles. The Trachinian maidens, who are *her* friends, even venture to express a strong opinion that Heracles is disgraced, and deserves anything. As Æschylus says, “young people are severe in judgment.” But, for the spectator, the glaring defect of the hero’s character is redeemed by the magnitude both of his merits and of his sufferings. And when we see him stilled beneath the hand of Fate, although in his commands to Hyllus some traces of the old wilful passionateness appear (like Ajax, he is the same man to the end), yet we can desire for him the heavenly restoration which we know to be in reserve.

HYLLUS interests us by his filial devotion both to father and mother. First, he is the seemingly careless youth, whose ears are, notwithstanding, open to all that can affect his father, and on the slightest hint of possible danger flies to his aid. When he next appears, the youth has suddenly become a man, full of wrath against his mother for her supposed crime, and doing his utmost to support his father through the agony. Then, once more, when he has seen Deianira’s end, and knows her innocent, he assumes a yet graver tone in pleading for her memory. Lastly, the purity of his young heart appears in his shrinking from the destined marriage with the beautiful Iole, whose charms have ruined both his parents, but to whom he owed protec-

tion for his father's sake. And as the drama ends he lifts a dark look to the frowning heavens.

ORESTES.—In the *Electra*, as in the *Trachiniæ*, the chief touches are laid upon the heroine. Orestes has little to say, though he has everything to do. In obeying the divine mandate, and carrying out the purpose of his life, he is clear-sighted, resolute, and unflinching. Only once does he retract a purpose which he has formed. He had intended not to confide in Electra until all was done. But when he sees her bending over the urn the young man's heart yearns to his sister, and he is compelled to speak. Nor has he reason to repent of this, for her sympathy strengthens his determination.

ÆGISTHUS is made as despicable as possible; and the bitter irony with which he is trained to his doom adds zest to the satisfaction with which the spectator sees the triumph of the Right. Yet even he is allowed to speak one spirited word. His allusion, when at the point of death, to the "future woes of Pelops' house" may be compared with the threat of Jezebel, "Had Zimri peace, who slew his master?" It is the only hint in the *Electra* of the existence of the fable of the Eumenides.

CREON is a different person in each of the three plays where he appears.

In the *Antigone* he is the incarnation of passionate self-will. He is the ruler as such, who claims that his word shall be law: the *new* ruler, who is always harsh. At first his authority wears the guise of public spirit. In breaking a law of piety he seems to himself and others to be vindicating the state. But in his sentence on the maiden, and in the contention with Hæmon, he insists more and more on his own personal authority. It is hard to say how much of his fault is selfishness, and how much is political fanaticism. Of the latter he

had given a pledge in the sacrifice of Megareus. But a crude egoism comes out increasingly in his treatment of others. To this passion, whether it be for the state or for his own authority, all private considerations must give way. And in his family relations it is obedience rather than affection which he demands.

Yet tenderness, and even piety, were not absent, but only overgrown; and when the case-hardened, "cast-iron" nature is suddenly broken, when the prophet by whose words he had saved the state has told him that he is destroying the state, it is the Nemesis of affection and of religious feeling that makes us sorry for Creon, who, like Shylock, however obdurate on the surface, is yet found in the end to be a human being. His superstitious eagerness to bury Polynices before all else shows the reaction of neglected piety, and his bitter wailing over Hæmon and Eurydice, whose deaths he takes upon himself, sufficiently prove that he is not made of stone. But what first moved him was the conviction that by his impiety, instead of vindicating, he had endangered *the state*.

CREON in the *Œdipus Tyrannus* has a cold unimpassioned practical nature, which is contrasted with the tragic impetuosity of the king. With provoking coolness he regards Œdipus less as the sovereign than as "the husband of my sister the queen." He honestly disclaims ambition, and while always ready to perform what is necessary for the public good, he is considerate towards Œdipus, and will do nothing rashly. He is the Banquo of the Greek *Macbeth*.

The CREON of the *Œdipus Coloneus* is again irascible and passionate, and again represents the political as opposed to the religious spirit; but he is now an old man, whereas in the *Antigone*, at a later period, he is in the prime of life. So little does Sophocles care to observe minute consistency between the fables of his different plays.

TEIRESIAS in the *Antigone* is the typical blind prophet, who relies on auspices, and utters that which the god inspires him at the moment to say. He has saved the state before-time by his words, and Creon has hitherto been willing to listen to him. But now he has been neglected, and he speaks his prophecy more vehemently when provoked by disbelief and scorn. His entrance is the more effective because no one has sent for him. He has been alarmed by the divine tokens, and he sounds an alarm to the soul of Creon by telling him that he is ruining Thebes.

The TEIRESIAS of the *Œdipus Tyrannus* is even more terrible, because the impression he makes is more individual and personal. He tells of no omens (it is Œdipus who afterwards refers to these), but speaks as one in immediate communion with the god, and as uttering truths that have been buried in his breast. Unwillingly he comes, and hardly can he be made to speak until his wrath is roused by false accusation. For though a prophet, he is also a man, and born of princely blood. In denouncing Œdipus he speaks as a king to a king, and as one who cares for Thebes no less than Œdipus does. There is more of the eloquence of human feeling in his prophecy here than in the *Antigone*.

The love of HÆMON, which adds bitterness both to Creon's and Antigone's fate, is pure from selfishness. In pleading for his bride he is at the same time really urging his father's interest. His instinctive tact in putting forward, not his own view of the situation, but the feeling of the citizens, adds the tribute of their admiration to that of his own generous affection. His impetuous action in endeavouring to save Antigone contrasts with his reserve when in his father's presence.

ODYSSEUS in the *Ajax* acts a very noble part. As the winner of the arms he has been the chief

object of the hero's rage; and, but for the intervention of Athena, he, in common with the Atridæ, would have been slain. But the goddess, in revealing to him the miserable state of Ajax, has opened his eyes to the meanness of insulting a fallen enemy, and his moderation and piety have the effect of vindicating the fame of Ajax and securing his burial. This essential nobleness of his is strangely different from what is thought and said of him. He whom Ajax imagines as exulting "with swart-visaged soul" over the misfortune of his foe is the man whose sympathies are especially touched by his fall.* This not only assists the action, but counterbalances the tragic passionateness of Ajax with a differing strain of heroism, which adds greatly to the strength of the whole piece, producing an effect which may be compared with that of the incorruptible figure of Kent amidst the hurly-burly of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Sophocles here anticipates the humane principle of the Platonic Socrates—"A good man can do no harm, even to an enemy."†

The ODYSSEUS of the *Philoctetes* is also zealous for the public good; but he is less nobly inspired than the Odysseus of the *Ajax*. In the one play wise moderation is contrasted with passion; in the other politic craft is opposed to simplicity and good faith. Odysseus in the *Ajax* is to be admired, and acts with the full concurrence of the gods; in the *Philoctetes* he may be excused, and is actuated by high motives, following what he believes to be the divine intention. But the gods effect their purposes without his help, and do not sanction the indirect means employed by him.

Although there is no statement to this effect in Sophocles,‡ it would seem that Ajax is imagined to

* Cp. Octavius weeping for the death of Antony.

† See *Ecce Homo*, c 22, p. 292.

‡ But see Pind *Isthm.* 5 (6).

have been born before the expedition of Telamon, which won for him the daughter of Laomedon. Thus TEUCER is the younger brother of Ajax by the father's side, and Ajax is not only the heir but the elder-born.

The outward relation of Teucer to the hero is thus in every way dependent. But his staunch faithfulness makes him an indispensable support. His absence on a foraging expedition at the critical moment is an aggravation of the calamity. Ajax' thoughts at once turn to him. Tecmessa longs for him to come. And his coming, although too late to save his brother's life, has the effect of saving Eurysaces, and of vindicating Ajax' fame. His whole bearing presents a noble image of disinterested affection in one whose intrinsic worth is superior to his position in the world. Some traits in him remind us of Falconbridge in Shakespeare's *K. John*. Like Hyllus, he supplies an invaluable link between the different parts of the drama.

The ATRIDE, MENELAUS and AGAMEMNON, are the most slightly drawn among the characters of Sophocles. It has been supposed that in Menelaus he aims his satire at Sparta, but it is more probable that he has left the generals much as he found them in the cyclic poem, throwing in a few touches from the oligarchical sentiment of the day. The part of the play in which they appear seems to have been hastily composed. Yet there are shades of contrast even here. Menelaus is more plausible, Agamemnon more autocratic and fierce.

THESEUS is a prince of few words, whose generous promptitude and unruffled coolness form at once an element of contrast and a bond of unity in the action of the *Œdipus Coloneus*. His rule is to

"Act in the living present,
Heart within and God o'erhead."

His unquestioning acceptance of Œdipus, and extension of protection to him, without asking for a

guarantee of the boon that is offered in return, is opposed to the superstitious shrinking of the chorus, and the crooked and unfeeling policy of Creon. His unconsciousness of the future, on the other hand, sets off the prophetic insight of Œdipus, who, though seemingly the receiver, is in reality the giver. And while the expectation of Theseus' coming, and the sense that he is ever at hand, make him even in his absence an agent of peace and harmony, his peremptory treatment of Creon at the critical moment gives movement as well as unity to the play.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PERSONS:—TECMESSA—JOCASTA—ISMENE—CHRY-
SOTHEMIS — CLYTEMNESTRA — EURYDICE — MINOR
CHARACTERS.

THE conquest of her father's city, which left TECMESSA homeless, had made her absolutely dependent upon Ajax. He had treated her with rough kindness, and from being her captor, had become her lover. Since that hour she is fondly devoted to him, though with a love that is not wholly free from fear. Yet in critical moments her affection prevails over her timidity. Her father and mother are now dead, and she has no one but Ajax to whom to cling. Though from a princess she has become a slave, she is in effect the wife of Ajax' youth, and has borne to him his only son. She understands him so far as simple love can read, and vaguely worships his heroic might, but the deeper movements of his soul are hidden from her. She understands the madness and the rough mood that follows it; she apprehends the consequences that must flow from his suicide, but she does not see that this is morally inevitable.

All her interests are bound up in her warrior lord. The house of Telamon afar off, which she has never seen, has taken the place to her of her lost home; her child is the heir of Salamis, and she will labour for him to the utmost of her strength.

Her maternal fears are easily aroused. While Ajax is delirious, she hides Eurysaces out of sight. When he calls for Teucer, she thinks that he is calling

for her boy. Yet when the danger of Ajax is fully known to her, she leaves the child in danger, so as to be unimpeded in the all-important quest.

She is the first to find Ajax, though too late. And although the hero's executors are a captive and a captive's son, the spectator feels that no honour is lacking either to his memory or to his heir.

To have awakened such a love as Tecmessa's, yet in the supreme moment to act as if it were not, is an indication at once of the greatness and of the solitariness of Ajax' soul.

JOCASTA is of a different mould. But the interest of her husband has been her ruling motive too. Affection is alive in her, although her self-violence in abetting Laius' crime of infanticide has left its hardening stamp on her imperial brow. The apparent success of that crime in frustrating the expressed intention of the gods has encouraged in her a contempt for divine oracles mingled with the bitter feeling of a vain sacrifice. "To such evils could Religion lead the way!" Yet in her husband's extremity she has recourse to the formalities of religion. (Cp. Creon in the *Antigone*.)

Her practical force is contrasted with the wavering excitability of Œdipus. Compare Lady Macbeth:—

"Why, worthythane,
You do unbend your manly strength, to think
So brainsickly of things."

And this character, combined with her position—she was queen-dowager when Œdipus was a stranger—gives her a remarkable ascendancy over her husband and over Creon.

When she knows the worst, and all her happiness is suddenly quenched in horror, she goes back, not in somnambulism, but in passionate recollection, to that critical moment of her life, when her love for Laius had overcome religious fears. She calls his spirit to witness the consequences of their act. Then she hangs herself.

The reality of Jocasta's affection both for Œdipus and for Laius is a salient point in the interest of the great tragedy.

ISMENE and CHRYSOTHEMIS are yielding, passive natures that serve to throw into relief the heroic characters of Antigone and Electra.

Of the two, ISMENE is by far the more amiable. In counselling submission, she has strong reasons on her side, and she admires the action of Antigone, though she dissuades her from it. When the die is cast, she is distracted with anxiety for her sister (as Portia for her husband Brutus), and when the deed comes to light, she would share the blame of it, were she permitted to do so. Not only does her weakness contrast with Antigone's strength, but her gentleness with the other's loftiness.

In ordinary times she would have been a model of virtue. But in the crisis of the heroic struggle she drops out of account

“ Between the fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.”

If ISMENE is forgotten towards the close of the Antigone, she is remembered again in the *Œdipus Coloneus*, where, according to the measure of her strength, she shares the burden with her sister. Here the conduct of both daughters is contrasted with that of the two brothers. But Ismene's devotion is less heroic than Antigone's. She had remained at the court of Eteocles, where she enjoyed the comforts of her station, but had maintained communication with the wanderers, and even gone forth secretly to visit them, and bring them needful intelligence. Now she comes again, not barefoot, like Antigone, or exposed to the sun, and alone, but well-mounted, and with a shady riding-hat, attended by a faithful domestic. She willingly goes to perform the necessary offering, and

carries to it the consecration of an uncorrupted mind. Her lamentation for her father, if less passionate, is not less plaintive than Antigone's.

CHRYSOTHEMIS is the spoilt darling of a court, where she keeps in favour through dissembling her true feelings. Not having Electra's moral strength, she has learned to make prudence her first principle. But her nature is not altogether corrupted. When she knows of danger to her sister, she is the first to warn her of it, and under Electra's influence, she withholds Clytemnestra's impious offering, though she does so with fear and trembling for the consequences of such temerity. In Sophocles it is she, the easily persuaded one, who finds and recognises the curl, and not Electra, who is too far gone in sorrow. Her joy at the discovery is real, though not excessive, and when her belief seems to be disproved, she is genuinely cast down. But she rejects her sister's counsel of despair, and breaks away from her on finding her impracticable.

In both these cases the poet is contrasting, not evil with good, but ordinary with extraordinary virtue.

Save in outward appearance, the CLYTEMNESTRA of Sophocles is without the terrors of the Æschylean tragedy-queen. She is a weak, criminal woman, who strives in vain to find excuses for her crime. She leans wholly upon the vile Ægisthus, and under his influence is cruel to her daughter Electra. Remorse comes to her only in the shape of fear. Her hardness is different from Jocasta's. The reported death of Orestes costs her a pang which she does not conceal, and which is subdued not by her volition, but through the relief which she feels at the removal of an imminent danger. Electra's filial love for her has been quenched not merely by her termagant cruelties, but by love for Agamemnon whom she has dishonoured.

For the just doom of such a being we feel a slight

and transient pity, which is obliterated when Ægisthus comes upon the scene.

EURYDICE, on the contrary, is the true mother, whose deep sorrow helps to emphasise for us the remorse of Creon in the *Antigone*. The private interests, which he has endeavoured to make nothing of, are all in all to her. She is still mourning for her son Megareus, whom Creon had previously allowed to fall a sacrifice, when the death of Hæmon is reported to her. She stands still, and listens to the whole account, then silently goes forth, kneels at the family altar, accuses Creon as the murderer of his sons, and plunges a sacrificial knife into her side. The outline of her character is lightly drawn, but is such as to make us feel how much the world has lost in the disappearance of the *Niobe* of Sophocles.

As the primary characters of Sophocles represent the depth and intensity of life, so his secondary characters reflect its many-sidedness.

“ This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in ; ”

and in these plays we are continually reminded that the type of character which for the time absorbs our interest does not exhaust the possibilities of human nature. Agamemnon and Menelaus, although “marvellous poor rogues,” have their *locus standi* and their intelligible point of view. Even Ægisthus, when he regards his own fate as a drop in the tide of woe that is still rising in the house of Pelops, shows a spark of deeper feeling which renders him imaginable. There are no “men of buckram” in Sophocles, no hollow masks, like the Admetus of Euripides—no

“ Dark bulks that tumble half alive
And founder on the shores of thought.”

And while each difference is true to nature, it is

carefully proportioned to the whole action and adjusted to the principal effect. This applies even to those **minor characters** which at first sight appear to be mere conventional adjuncts of the drama—*attendants, messengers, watchmen, heralds*, and the like. All have individual peculiarities which have been assigned to them with studied reference to the situation and to the more important persons. The messenger in the *Ajax* is a friend of Teucer's, and has a personal goodwill to the Salaminians, though he is not one of them. He gives his message discreetly and looks for no reward. The messenger in the *Antigone* is one of the attendants of Creon; in the *Æd. Col.*, one of the train of Theseus. In the *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, as has been already said, the part of the messenger is played by the old man and the disguised mariner; in the *Trachiniae* by an old woman of Deianira's household. The rustic busybody who runs from the market-place to bring the first news of Heracles' coming, and who reveals the duplicity of Lichas, has something in common with the impertinent watchman in the *Antigone*; but the motive in the one case is to aggravate the rudeness of the shock to Deianira's feelings, in the other to set off by contrast Antigone's heroism. In the *Ædipus Tyrannus*, the persons of the two servants are carefully contrasted. Both are aged, both faithful, both careful of their charge, but the Corinthian is light-hearted, simple, unsuspicious, as one whose life has been free from serious care; whereas the Theban is burdened with one life-long secret and with another which has embittered his declining years.* Hence he is slow to come when sent for, and slow to speak when he comes, answering one question by another. And when he learns the truth which his fellow gaily thrusts on him, his long-

* Solger supposes that the shepherd concealed the fact that Laius was slain by one man, because, knowing both of the oracle and the exposure, he suspected that *Ædipus* was the son of Laius. But had the poet meant this, it would have been more clearly indicated.

pent feelings rush forth in fiery strength. No voice could be more suitable to croak to Œdipus,

“Be very sure that thou wast born to woe.

The herald LICHAS is an amiable but vain creature, whose levity assists the action of the *Trachiniæ*. By foolishly boasting to the villagers he allows the truth prematurely to reach Deianira's ears, and he is easily imposed upon by her dissimulation. He wastes time in chatting with the maidens, of which Deianira avails herself to anoint the robe. Though his fate was undeserved, it does not affect us deeply.

The OLD MAN, or PÆDAGOGUS, in the *Electra* has a paternal manner both towards Orestes and his sister that helps to link the action to the past, and may be compared with the Corinthian shepherd's tone in addressing Œdipus, whom he had nursed in infancy.

Silent persons are **Pylades** in the *Electra*, **Iole** in the *Trachiniæ*, the child **Eurysaces** in the *Ajax*, the **two girls** in the *Œdipus Tyrannus* (see above, p. 104), and **attendants** in various scenes.

PYLADES, as a disinterested witness and supporter of the act of justice, adds force to the main intention of the play, and while his presence gives the spectator hope that Electra's lot is not always to be a lonely one, it also helps to account for the unresisting submission of Ægisthus, who must be imagined as running hastily in advance of his guards and so falling an easy prey to the two armed men.

The confused experience of IOLE, who, in short space, is orphaned, wedded, widowed, and again betrothed, is best expressed by silence. The effect of her presence in revealing Deianira's character is one of the many beauties of the *Trachiniæ*.

The infant EURYSACES clinging to his father's

corpse, ANTIGONE and ISMENE at their ruined father's knees, although silent, are by no means idle figures.

Nor is the list of Sophoclean characters confined to those who appear upon the stage. Some that are only mentioned have a measure of vitality not often equalled by the *dramatis personæ* of melodrama. The grief of Eriboea, the gloom of Telamon, the gracious mien and holy dignity of Calchas, Electra's Agamemnon (very different from the geneial in the *Ajax*), the paternal heart of Polybus, the stern, impetuous Laius, the wily Nessus, the proud Eteocles, the princely Helenus, are as real to us as if we had heard and seen them. Yet their natures are merely indicated, not analysed or discussed. There is nothing in Sophocles like the description of the chieftains in the *Seven against Thebes*. A word is repeated, a gesture intimated, a single act reported, and the man or woman lives before us in a way that can be paralleled only from Shakespeare.

And therefore, what has been attempted in this and the preceding chapters, however necessary, must always be unsatisfactory. It is like taking single statues from the group upon a pediment and examining them apart, or studying separate features of a face at rest whose chief beauty lies in its expression.

Only two *divine persons* appear in the seven plays, ATHENA at the opening of the *Ajax*, HERACLES at the close of the *Philoctetes*. The fact that the two theophanies come thus at the beginning and end of the poet's known works is not without significance. The personal presence of Athena is one of several traces in the *Ajax* of the continued influence of Æschylus, while the Heracles of the *Philoctetes* is rather related to the *Deus ex machinâ* so frequently employed by Euripides.

But already in the *Ajax* the palpable intervention of the goddess is at the vanishing point. She is hardly visible to Odysseus, though he hears her voice; more clearly seen by Ajax in his madness; but to

Tecmessa she is a mere shadow. When Odysseus again enters he makes no reference to the vision. It is a part of the *induction*, or opening, which, as we have seen, is in this case separable from the rest of the play. Tecmessa speaks of Athena in the spirit of the old legend as spiting Ajax to please Odysseus. But the poet has moralised this crude fable by showing us that the goddess' motive was to save the lives of the generals, and that the rage of Ajax that was thwarted by this heaven-sent madness was proof of a temper which could not otherwise be healed. In human language he had justly incurred the divine wrath. But this only endures for a day, and is a reason why other men should fear, and refrain from the indulgence of their pride. This, the true lesson of the situation, is felt by two persons only ; by Calchas, the inspired prophet, who, seeing beyond the present moment, shows kindness to Teucer ; and by Odysseus, who has been explicitly taught by Athena.

The *Philoctetes* is the only play in which the knot is cut by immediate divine intervention. The cause of this lies in the character of the hero, whose wrongs have left in him the fixed idea—never to return to Troy. But while the removal of this obstacle is the necessary conclusion of the drama, the chief interest of the spectator has been previously satisfied by the self-sacrifice of Neoptolemus. Hence the poet can afford to lay less stress on the catastrophe. And the apparition of Heracles to Philoctetes is easily imaginable. Had not Philoctetes ministered to the hero in his last hours on earth? Was not the bow, which he had now received afresh, a perpetual memorial of their intercourse? Was not the assumption of Heracles to Olympus from the top of Cæta a recent thing? And what influence but that of Heracles could soften the obduracy of his devoted follower?

Thus it appears that Sophocles, in yielding to the revival of celestial machinery which was becoming a fashion of the day, still consults verisimilitude as far as possible, and blends human motives with the divine action.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHORUS.

THE chorus in a play of Sophocles is less prominent than in Æschylus, and its function is more consistently dramatic than in Euripides. As Aristotle says, "Sophocles employs the chorus as one of the persons of the drama"; but he never makes it the protagonist or chief person. In the *Supplikes* and *Eumenides* of Æschylus the chorus attract a large share of the interest of the spectators to themselves. In the *Phœnissæ* and *Orestes* of Euripides they often do their best to distract attention from the action immediately in hand. But even the wildest lyric flights of the chorus in the *Antigone* and *Œdipus Tyrannus* spring naturally out of the feelings excited by the situation of the principal persons, and keep the mind fixed upon their destiny. If the elders chant that "Of all wonders man is chief," it is because their thoughts are shaken by a mysterious crime; if they descant on the beauty of holiness, it is because the impiety of Jocasta has aroused their fears.

I. *General conception of the chorus.*—It is necessary to distinguish between the **lyrical** and **personal** aspects of the chorus, but the two glide into each other and are never wholly separated. In speaking, the coryphæus is still the "ideal spectator," in singing, the choreutæ are still elders or mariners, matrons or maidens.

1. *The chorus as an ideal spectator.*—The action upon the stage has roused the spectator's sympathies, and awakened in him various emotions. By means

of the chorus the poet is able to gather up these feelings, to fix them and to focus them aright, so as at once to interpret the mind of the audience to themselves, and confirm in them the right impression. Thus at each critical moment the emotions that have been called forth are kept alive, and are directed into whatever channel is most conducive to the purpose which the poet holds in reserve. The same end is partially secured in the modern drama by means of soliloquies, which equally with the choral odes require a certain amount of conventional departure from dramatic truth.

2. *The chorus connects the action with the world at large.*—So far Sophocles justifies the theory which speaks of the chorus as an “idealised spectator.” But this intention is kept by him as far as possible within natural limits. The “lesson of the situation” is often only to be read between the lines, and is hidden from those who utter it, whose own horizon is bounded by their supposed character and circumstances. The use which they more directly serve is to show how the action is regarded, not by an “ideal spectator,” but by ordinary bystanders at the time, so that we are enabled to see the life of Ajax or of Œdipus, not only as an isolated existence illumined only by the intensity of their own passions from within, but as the centre of a more extensive field, and as judged by the cool daylight of the surrounding world. We know the use that Shakespeare makes of his first and second gentlemen, of Ross and Angus, of Salarino and Solanio—of soldiers, servants, citizens, in the Roman plays. A similar purpose is more effectually served by the chorus in Sophocles.

3. *The chorus in direct relation to the hero or heroine.*—But, thirdly, the chorus always stands in a definite relation to the chief person, and this point, as was before observed, has always been carefully considered in the original conception of each play. And by this, which is the essentially dramatic use, the other functions of the chorus are considerably modified. Thus in the *Philoctetes*, where the mariners of

Neoptolemus are bound by the necessity of the situation to a merely negative attitude, their power of expressing true feeling is very considerably curtailed. Their utterance is less the exponent of the action than a sort of *obbligato* accompaniment. In the *Ajax* and *Œdipus Coloneus* the chorus are for special reasons morally disqualified from taking a wide and liberal view of things. This is reserved for Odysseus and Theseus. And in the *Elektra* the Argive matrons are in such close sympathy with the heroine that they can hardly be said to bring the action into contact with the world at large. The mute person of Pylades has more of this effect.

II. *Part taken by the chorus in the plays of Sophocles.*—In considering the part of the chorus, it will be convenient to touch separately (*a*) the choral odes, (*b*) brief or interrupted lyrical strains, (*c*) the part of the chorus in ordinary dialogue.

a. (1) The most typical and regular in structure of the **choral odes** are those which hold a central place in each of the great tragedies, where the action pauses for a moment, before hurrying to its consummation: in the *Ajax*, "O isle of glory"; in the *Antigone*, "Of wonders without end, most wonderful is man"; in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, "May it be mine to keep the unwritten laws"; in the *Coloneus*, "Friend, in this land of noblest steeds thou art come," &c. In each of these we have a lyric poem of the highest beauty, which at the same time holds a distinct place in the economy of the drama. Indeed, this description might be applied almost equally to several other odes. Each of the five **stasima** of the *Antigone* has its own special beauty, its own rhythm, and doubtless had its own music, and none of them could be omitted without injury to the whole structure. A great part of the effect, and especially of the variety of effect, is necessarily lost to us. We cannot always confidently tell what parts were sung by all together, and what by separate bands, nor in what order the several members stood or moved. That these arrange-

ments and changes of position were often complicated is extremely probable; and the correspondences of language between strophe and antistrophe are frequently such as to suggest an antiphonal performance.

In most cases the attention of the spectators is wholly occupied by the chorus, but occasionally the strain is made more thrilling by the relative position of an actor who remains upon the stage.

(2) The varieties in the **parodos**, or opening strain of the chorus, have been already mentioned. The *parodi* in the *Antigone* and *Œdipus Tyrannus* are the most highly wrought. Those in the *Electra*, *Œdipus Coloneus*, and *Philoctetes* are varied from the rest, and will be noticed under the following head (b).

(3) The place of a *stasimon* is sometimes taken by an ode of a slightly different kind, accompanied either with **dancing** or with an unusual amount of **gesture**. Some think that one half the chorus sang the words, while the other half danced to the music of each stanza. The most distinct example is in the *Ajax*, where, under the rebound of glad feeling occasioned by their captain's supposed change of mind, the chorus invoke Pan to come and dance with them. An analogous tone is perceptible, though with important differences arising out of the situation, in the *Antigone*, where the chorus cry to Dionysus to fulfil the hope which the repentance of Creon has awakened; in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, where they cry to Apollo to reveal the birth of Œdipus; and more obviously in the *Trachinæ*, where the maidens break into sudden song in their joy at the announcement that Heracles is on his way home. Different again from these, and yet equally to be distinguished from the regular *stasima*, is the solemn invocation to the infernal powers which accompanies the disappearance of Œdipus in the *Œd. Col.*, and the words of dark import which the Argive matrons send after Orestes as he enters the palace of his fathers. But the truth is that the odes of Sophocles are not to be precisely classified; each has its own individual character, which is apposite to the

place which it fills, and has more or less of the nature of a pæan, or of a prayer, or of a lament, or of a dancing song, according to the requirements of the moment. Thus the invocation to Sleep, in the *Philoctetes*, is in some respects like the two last-mentioned canticles, although in another way it may be compared to the brief apostrophe to Love in the *Antigone*.

b. The chorus not only fill the intervals of the action with their songs, but give point to certain moments of the action by chanting **brief strains**, or lyrical phrases, which indicate or characterise some new incident or some change of feeling. Rhythmical writers have distinguished three ways in which the metrical language of the Greeks was uttered—(1) singing (μελῳδία), (2) recitative (παρακαταλογία), (3) recitation (καταλογία). The passages now spoken of were for the most part given in the second of these three ways, being chanted by a single voice, or by a few voices together. Thus, in the *Ajax*, between the exit of Menelaus and the entrance of Agamemnon, the coryphæus accompanies the exit of Teucer with a few lines marking the situation; in the *Antigone*, after the opening, attention is similarly called to the entrance of each actor in turn; in the *Electra*, the excitement of the moment between the deaths of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus is relieved by a strophe and antistrophe, each of three lines; in the *Philoctetes*, the chorus enter in colloquy with Neoptolemus, and presently one of the chorus chants a feigned confirmation of his falsehood, and another, antistrophically, though after a long interval, expresses a feigned pity for Philoctetes, &c. &c.

In some of these shorter lyric passages the chorus directly take part in the action, as in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, where they intercede for Œdipus with Creon, or in the *Coloneus*, where they expostulate with Creon on behalf of Œdipus, and summon Theseus to return. In the regular **commos**, where they respond, whether in lyric or iambic verse, to the lyrical complaints of a chief person on the stage, they can rarely

be said to act, for their attitude is almost wholly passive. Their calm, unmoved solemnity contrasts with the excitement of the actor. See for example the two passages of this kind in the *Antigone*. But the last "commos" of the *Philoctetes* forms an exception to this; and throughout the earlier part of the *Œdipus Coloneus* the part of the chorus is not only essential to the action but is next in importance to that of the chief agent.

c. In the "commoi" it is generally supposed that the members of the chorus chanted or spoke in a certain order, which, however varied, was always symmetrically arranged. Also in the level **dialogue** not only the coryphæus, but two or more of the choreutæ who stood nearest to him probably took part. For an example of this see the passage of *Antigone*, where several members of the chorus in turn briefly indicate their surprise at the decree, so giving occasion for Creon's observation, that individuals have long since been carping at his rule. If this is a just view of such passages, it is hardly probable that, as has been sometimes asserted, the coryphæus when he took part in dialogue, mounted from the orchestra to the stage (λογεῖον).

These brief iambic utterances of the chorus through its leader or leaders, although but rarely furthering the action, form an important link in the construction of every Greek drama. For they sustain the conventional illusion by which the chorus represent a body of persons who stand in a close and definite relation to the hero or heroine and may be said to mediate between them and the outer world. Sometimes they interpret a gesture, as where the Argive women perceive the access of wrath in Clytemnestra; sometimes they note the ominous significance of a silent exit. More often they recommend moderation to one who is under the influence of passion. Were it not for traditional convention, there might seem to be some incongruity between these comparatively frigid utterances and the outbursts of

lyric song ; but this judgment is modified when we consider that it is not the whole chorus, but single members of it, who take part in the dialogue. Individually, they are feeble and cold ; collectively, they have great powers of feeling.

CHAPTER XIV.

POETIC FORM.

THE poetic beauty of Sophocles is inseparable from dramatic effect. His works must be imagined as acted and not merely as heard; and he is then seen to be not only a great dramatist but a great poet, whether the test of great poetry be the "noble and profound application of ideas to life," or musical harmony of expression.

1.—Of the ideas of Sophocles "on man" and "on human life" something has already been said. But no account of him can be complete that does not dwell upon **his feeling for external nature**. No Greek poetry is without this element, though it has sometimes been strangely overlooked. But it is the more important to notice it in Sophocles, because, like all else in him, it is so finely subordinated to dramatic purposes.

1. The scene of each drama is clearly imagined, and whether represented or not is brought vividly before the mind. The features of the country round Thebes and Argos; the misty meadows of the Troad, contrasted with bright, rocky Salamis; the pleasant banks of the Spercheius, haunted by Artemis and the Nymphs, the wild promontory of Lemnos, the manifold loveliness of Colonus, all pass before us together with the actions of which they form the setting.

2. The heroes of Sophocles are most conscious of natural surroundings at the times when they are most deeply moved. Thus Ajax apostrophises the Scamander; Antigone, the fountain of Dirce; Œdipus, Citheron and the wood by the cross-road; Philoctetes, the wild creatures and the cave.

3. The natural objects whose influence thus appears are those with which men's lives have brought them into contact. An ancient Greek could not be truthfully represented as going in quest of the picturesque. The beauties which the old men of Colonus celebrate in their immortal song are those of a shrubbery at their door, watered by artificial means—much as if a Londoner were to extol the glories of Kensington Gardens. This limitation was characteristic of the ancient world, and it is shared by Sophocles. There is often a certain homeliness in his descriptions. But his love of nature is not the less profound. And in his allusion to snow-smitten Cyllene, or to the surf heaping the tangle on the shore, we see that he, too, had “lifted up his eyes to the hills,” and that the more rugged charms of nature were well-known to him. On the other hand, nothing is too minute for his loving observation. Witness the lines about the poplar in calm weather :—

“ If nowhere else, yet in her topmost bough
Some breath is moving and the leaflets wave.”—*Fragm.*

And it may be observed that in the two last plays, where the tragic intensity is somewhat diminished, the influences of external nature are more prominent.

I have purposely avoided quoting from the extant plays, because Sophocles can never be appreciated piecemeal, least of all in translations. But the following passage, more than once referred to in this chapter, is in some ways exceptional.

Colonus, the garden of Athens, is thus described :—

- “ Friend, in our land of victor steeds thou art come
 To this Heaven-fostered haunt, Earth’s fairest home,
 Gleaming Colonus, where the nightingale
 In cool green covert warbles ever clear,
 True to the deep-flushed ivy and the dear,
 Divine, inviolable shade,
 From wildered boughs and myriad fruitage made,
 Sunless at noon, stormless in every gale.
 Wood-roving Bacchus there, with mazy round,
 And his nymph-nurses, range the unoffended ground.
- “ And nourished day by day with heavenly dew
 Bright flowers their never-failing bloom renew,
 From eldest time Dêô * and Cora’s crown,
 Clustering narcissus, and the golden gleam
 Of crocus ; while from many a sleepless spring,
 Perennial waters duly ministering,
 Cephisus, never dwindling down,
 Daily, with quickening power,
 Pours on boon Earth his sweet, untainted shower.
 Her wide breast heaves, thrilled by the gentle stream.
 The quiring Muses love to seek the spot,
 And Aphrodite’s golden car forsakes it not.”—*Æd. Col.*

4. In his feeling for the lower animals there is a peculiar tenderness, in true accord with his penetrative humanity. His pity for the vanquished bull, widowed and wandering, and for the poor strayed heifer, will occur at once to every reader. The following lines from one of the fragments are less familiar :—

- “ Like some proud filly, that rude hinds have ta’en
 And cropped the yellow harvest of her mane.
 When, issuing from the stall, she tastes the brook,
 Glased in the stream she spies her altered look.
 ’Twould move to pity, sure, a heart of stone
 To mark how she laments the glory flown,
 Shuddering with shame and frenzied with despair
 For the lost honours of her shadowing hair.”

II.—The **language** of Sophocles is characterised by (1) **simplicity**, (2) **subtlety**, and (3) **strength** ; and, in a word, (4) by **beauty**.

1. He is well aware of the truth that men when

* Demeter.

deeply moved express themselves in the simplest words, and no one has excelled him in

“The gift which speaks
The deepest things most simply.” *

What words could be simpler or more direct than those in which *Cædipus* proclaims his discovery, or in which *Heracles* accepts the revelation of his doom? Where is expression more translucent than in the appeal of *Tecmessa* to *Ajax*, or the lament of *Electra* over the urn?

2. But this simplicity is the result of a very subtle process of adaptation, which sometimes causes no small difficulty to the interpreter. It is a difficulty of the same kind with that which is found in rendering aright *Miranda's* “Do you love me?” or *Desdemona's* “I am very glad on't,” or the “Saw? Who?” of *Hamlet*. The words are clear, but their exact force depends on some particular shade of difference in situation, in feeling, or in character. There is here not only an art concealed by art, but an art whose very intention is apt to be concealed from those who do not apprehend each poem as a complex whole. Many phrases which at first sight appear obscure or trivial, are seen, when viewed in their relation to the main purpose, to be at once natural and profound.

The simplicity of the parts is inseparable from the subtle harmony of the entire structure, a harmony resulting from a single intention thoroughly carried out, so as often to give an illusory impression of absolute simplicity. A play of *Sophocles* comes nearer than any other composition to *Plato's* ideal of a piece of language that is “like a living organism, having a head and hands and feet.”

3. As we become more familiar with an author we are less conscious of the degree of simplicity or of subtlety which distinguishes him. But what never fails to strike us in the language of *Sophocles* is its strength. This, indeed, becomes more apparent when

* *Kingsley's Saints' Tragedy.*

we have so far mastered him as to deal with each of his dramas in its entirety. Then, and not till then, are we fully aware of the massiveness that goes along with his refinement. A resolute compression, like that of Dante, a parsimonious reserve that rarely wastes a word, a power of sustained harmony only less observable than that of Milton because more transparent, and again only comparable to Dante amongst modern poets, are some of the elements of this strength. The *Antigone* and *Œdipus Tyrannus* are like chains of adamant wrought with surpassing skill. Work of this kind cannot be illustrated by quotation, and it would be useless to adduce short passages, even were it permissible to transcribe them in the original Greek. But setting apart the two great works just mentioned, no one can read the last speech of Ajax or the concluding scene of the *Electra*, or the indignant outburst of Philoctetes, without feeling that Sophocles, as a poet, is very strong.

4. To characterise any portion of Greek poetry as "beautiful exceedingly," is like inlaying gold with gold. Yet without this it is impossible to describe the language of these seven plays. They have each of them a beauty like that of an individual countenance which owns a perfect consonance of feature and expression. It is vain to attempt to analyse it. We may speak of appositeness, of moderation, proportion, symmetry, of infallible perception, of profound truth of feeling, of words which no one else could have divined, but which, once spoken, are felt to have been "inevitable." But the secret of the charm remains unexpressed. Who shall explain the beauty of "I gin to be aweary of the sun," or of "The moon doth with delight Look round her when the heavens are bare?" Best be content with saying that the beauty of Sophoclean language is at once in the whole and in every part, that it is original and unique, and that it is from within.

III.—Little can be said here about Greek metres ;

but it is impossible to speak of Sophocles' excellence as a poet without some mention of them.

1. The specialities of Greek lyric rhythm are, to some extent, lost to us with the music; but we can still feel a distinctive character in the numbers of each poet. The union of severity with variety, and of sweetness with strength, is here also peculiarly attained by Sophocles. Any Greek scholar who takes in hand the parodos of the *Antigone*, and compares it with the second stasimon, may understand at once that Sophocles excelled less in the richness or melody of particular cadences, though he is great also here, than in the adaptation of rhythm to expression.

The marching anapæstic measure holds a lower place with him than in the religious pageantry of Æschylus and the operatic movements of Euripides. He has a special fondness for the Glyconic, the most equable of lyric forms, which he has artfully varied. His skill is shown rather in the structure of whole strophes, or rather of whole odes, than in particular phrases. And a correlation is often observable between the different metres of the several lyric portions of the same play, indicating a unity of metrical design, which would probably be more evident, if we had the music.

2. The "senarius," or tragic iambic trimeter, of the dialogue has peculiarities which can be more intelligibly indicated to the English reader. For this metre has a real analogy to our own blank verse, which, although shorter by two syllables, bears much the same proportion to the average length of words.*

In passing from Æschylus to Sophocles, we are conscious of a transition which may without fanciful-

* This element of rhythmical effect is sometimes forgotten in attempting to Anglicise Greek metres. Thus the anapæstic tetrameter is practically a longer measure in English than in Greek, because English words are less in average length than Greek words. The English Alexandrine is ill-adapted to represent the Senarius, partly for the same reason, and partly because of its tendency to divide in equal parts.

ness be compared to the advance from "Marlowe's mighty line" to the varied harmony of Shakespeare. On the other hand, except perhaps in the *Philoctetes*, Sophocles retains a degree of severity, which is relaxed in Euripides. But in Sophocles more than in Euripides, as in Shakespeare more than in Fletcher, we have to consider whole paragraphs rather than single lines. The more sustained continuity of rhythm is shown, not only by the frequency of "light endings," but by the existence of *synaphea*, i.e. the elision of a vowel at the end of a line before a vowel at the beginning of the next line, a licence in which Sophocles alone has indulged. An unbroken sentence often runs through several lines, and it was generally allowed that to recite Sophocles one must have good strong lungs. The variety of pause, which results from this mode of handling the iambic, is almost as great in Sophocles as in the blank verse of Shakespeare's middle period. Nothing in Greek poetry resembles the constant breaks and transitions of Shakespeare's later manner. The following translation of a fragment preserves the chief pauses of the original :—

"My daughter, Venus is not Love alone,
But many a title longs to her beside.
She is deep Hades; she is deathless Force,
And she is maddening Frenzy; she's Desire
Unmingled; she is Mourning: all's in her
That's eager, that is tranquil, that's perverse.
For she invades each bosom that hath lodged
A soul. What heart is not this Goddess' prey?"*

* Nauck attributes this fragment to Euripides.

CHAPTER XV.

FRAGMENTS FROM LOST PLAYS.

FOR reasons which are not far to seek, the fragments of Sophocles contain little that is of independent interest. We owe their preservation chiefly to moralists like Plutarch and divines like Clement of Alexandria, who either availed themselves for illustration's sake of some neat expression of a universal truth, or remarked on some apparent or real coincidence with Christian doctrine. Hence the quotations consist, for the most part, not of pathetic speeches or even of striking descriptions, but of mere generalities, in which Sophocles is less rich than other poets, for the very reason that he is more purely dramatic. Thucydides says that the greatness of cities is not to be judged by the extent of their ruins. And the example of Sophocles shows us that it would be equally fallacious to judge a tragic poet by his fragments. Torn from their context, and from that association with character and situation which alone made them live, these proverbial sayings, familiar commonplaces already in the time of Sophocles, sound more than threadbare to the modern ear. The meaning is trite, and if the expression is firm and delicate, it may often appear wanting in colour.

1. The fragments thus confirm the opinion that Sophocles is not to be estimated piecemeal. He has not the exuberance of Shakespeare, nor the restless originality of Æschylus, but he does not need these qualities for his purpose, and had they been present with him, his work might have been less perfect than it is.

2. Just as the fragments of Euripides provoke the suspicion that some of his lost plays, such as the *Erechtheus* and *Phaethon*, were greater than almost any that remain, so those of Sophocles force upon us the reflection that some of his work must have been inferior to that which we know. It is true that many of the quotations are taken from satyric dramas, in which it is unlikely that Sophocles should have greatly excelled. But some of those which are undoubtedly tragic remind us of what Longinus says of the inequality of Sophocles, and are in no way superior to passages in the extant plays which critics have condemned as interpolations.

3. We are also led to think that in rapidly producing the long series of his plays, the poet may have sometimes repeated himself, so that if all had remained, our impression of his greatness might not have been proportionately enhanced.

In attempting an English rendering of some of the fragments, we may begin with those of which the general connection is most apparent.

1. An unhappy wife (Procne?) is longing for her former home:—

“ Now, parted thence, I am nothing. Ah ! how oft
Have I perceived this of the woman's lot,
What nobodies we are ! As girls, 'tis true,
We live sweet lives within our father's house ;
For ignorance hath alway store of bliss ;
But when we have reached our bloom, and gained some
 sense,
Then we are cast off, exported, sold away
From our true parents and our father's gods
To foreign husbands, if not barbarous,
And to strange homes, or hostile. In a night
Our life is changed. And, once beneath the yoke,
One needs must praise it, and declare, ‘ All's well.’ ”

2. Old Peleus is led in by a female slave :—

“ Sole handmaid to the son of Æacus,
I guide his aged steps as if a child's ;
For man in age is once again a child.”

3. Telamon has just heard of his son Ajax' death :—

“How vain, then ! O my son !
How vain was my delight in thy proud fame,
Whilst I supposed thee living ! The fell Fury
From her dark shroud beguiled me with sweet lies.”

4. A landsman is uncomfortable at sea :—

“Ah, me ! What greater joy than to set foot
On shore, and there beneath a quiet roof
Hear the thick raindrops with half-slumbering ear.”

5. A father, or pædagogus, is taking young children to school :—

“Now, then, since all the holy rite is done,
Proceed we, children, to the Muses' haunt,
The halls of sage instruction and grave lore.
Add daily to your knowledge, whilst ye may,
While bettering is in season. Every boy
Learns mischief of himself without a fee.
That needs not toil nor tutoring. But what's good,
Even though he find a teacher, he is slow
To acquire, and soon forgets it Labour, then,
And watch 'gainst idleness, my boys, for fear
Ye should be thought the sons of ignorant men,
Or of a roving, home-neglecting sire.” *

6. Compare this with the preceding :—

“Boys, if you neglect the Muse,
All your youthful time ye lose,
And are dead for what ensues.”

7. This is said of a widowed mother :—

“With a man's mind she guards her orphaned home.”

8. This, of a perverse temper :—

“Much need of curbs, ay, and of rudders, too.”

9. Phædra entreats her handmaids to keep her secret :—

“Feel for me, and betray not. Though 'tis hard
For women to keep counsel, yet should women
Help woman to conceal her sex's shame.”

* There is some doubt whether these lines belong to Sophocles or not.

10. A bereaved person wishes for death :—

“ I long to die and go to him ! ”

“ No haste !

Doubt not of winning to thy destined goal.”

11. “ Like the snowflake on the river ” :—

“ My lot still changes hue. The whirling wheel
Of Providence exalts it and brings down.
So the moon’s radiant visage never stays
Two nights together in one form, but first
Peers forth from nothingness with youthful mien,
Then brightening moves and rounding to the full,
Till, just as she attains her noblest show,
She wanes, and dwindles back to nothingness ”

12. One of the *mystæ* reflects on the happiness of his condition :—

“ Thrice blest is he

Who sees these rites ere he depart. For him
Hades is life, for others nought but woe.”

13. One in affliction says :—

“ Let no man counsel me, but who has felt
Sorrow like mine.”

14. “ Deep wits and sage philosophers you’ll find
Like our friend here, perfect in counselling
The poor unfortunate. But let Fate cross
The jauntiest of them all, and scourge him backward,
Where’s his philosophy ? ’Tis no more seen.”

15. “ Toil, that is past, is sweet.”

16. “ There is a pleasure even in words that bring
Forgetfulness of present misery.”

17. Of memory :—

“ Blest power that holds

The narrow isthmus of our little life
Out of the seas of Time.”

18. “ Sweet and bitter fancy ” :—

“ Love’s malady, this torment we desire.

’Twere an apt likeness to compare it thus :

When Frost reigns from the sky, and children seize

On blocks of ice, the newly felt delight
Is unalloyed at first, but presently,
Thrilled by the smart, they neither will let go,
Nor can they hold their treasure without pain.
Even so one passion at one time enforces
Our lover both to do and to forbear."

19. "To men unfortunate one night is ten;
But to glad feasters morning comes unsought." *

20. An invocation :—

"Helios, lord of light, and thou
Holy flame on Hecat's brow,
Onward borne as still she moves
Through Olympus and Earth's groves,
Hallowing every triple way
With a consecrating ray;
Crown'd with oak and the divine
Horror of the serpent-twine!"

21. "Joy steals on me, and summons up the tear"

22. "'Tis noblest to be righteous; best, to live
Free from disease; but pleasantest to have
One's wish, whate'er it be, from day to day."

23. "This is most painful, when the man who might
Mend all, brings down the trouble on his head."

24. Description of the fabulous Nysæan shore :—

"There Bacchus' grape is ripened in a day.
Bright morning sees the tendril and the flower;
By noon green fruit hath formed, and ere the sun
Declines, the clusters redden more and more,
Till toward eve the vintage, fully ripe,
Is cut and gather'd, and the vats o'erflow."

25. "Ne'er count good fortune blessedness, until
The man's full life is finish'd. Little time
Suffices the bad Genius to bring down
Great wealth, through God-sent mutability,
And the dire potency of dangerous gifts."

26. "From one deep fountain sorrow and delight
Both spring. Else why should joy give birth to tears?"

27. "Then hide thou nothing. Time, who sees and hears
All that is done or said, unfoldeth all."

* Reading εἰς παθόντα δ' ἡμέρα φθάνει.

CHAPTER XVI.

TRANSLATIONS.

THE earliest translation of Sophocles into a modern language seems to have been an Italian version of the *Antigone*, made at Lyons under French influences by Luigi Alemanni in 1532. De Baif, the fellow-student of Ronsard, translated into French the *Electra* in 1537, and the *Antigone* in 1573.* So far as England was concerned, the Greek dramatists do not seem to have benefited by the rage for classical translation which prevailed in the latter half of the sixteenth century. People were contented to take their ideas of ancient tragedy from Seneca.

1. The first attempt to give Sophocles an *English* dress had a whimsical enough motive. In 1649, shortly after the death of Charles I., Christopher Wace, a royalist scholar, then in Holland, made a translation of the *Electra* in English rhymed verse, and presented it to "Her Highness the Lady Elizabeth."† The commendatory poem which accompanies this tolerably close version of the Greek tragedy, leaves no doubt of the allegorical intention of the translator. Agamemnon is the martyred sovereign; Orestes is his son Charles; *Electra* is the Princess Elizabeth.

* Patin, *Etudes sur les Tragiques Grecs*, Paris, 1870; *Sophocle*, p. 284.

† Ten years previously the Dutch poet Vondel had translated the *Electra*, and had dedicated his version to the poetess Tesselschade—E. W. Gosse's *Studies in Northern Literature*, p. 275. Vondel's translation of *Sophocles* was completed in 1688.—*Ib.* p. 311.

Whether the play thus rendered was performed or not before the exiled Court, it is impossible to say. But in the course of the following century transcripts from Sophocles were more than once publicly performed in England. French criticism had called the attention of literary persons to the Greek drama, and in Dryden and Lee's *Œdipus*, first printed in 1679, some of the chief scenes from the *Œdipus Tyrannus* were actually embodied.*

Lewis Theobald, the contemporary of Pope, whose contemptuous notice of him in the *Dunciad* his emendations of Shakespeare would alone prove to be undeserved, produced in 1714-5 blank verse translations of the *Ajax*, *Electra*, and *Œdipus Tyrannus*, which have considerable merit. There is no attempt to give the proper lyrical effect to the choral odes, but the dialogue is more than passable. And at some time between 1714 and 1760, Theobald's *Electra* was in fact produced upon the London stage, as is shown by the *Dramatic Miscellany* of 1760. Orestes wore mediæval armour!

A translation of the *Philoctetes* by Thomas Sheridan was published at Dublin in 1725.

The first complete translation of Sophocles into English verse was that of Thomas Francklin (at one time Professor of Greek at Cambridge), published in 1758-9. It attracted considerable attention, and Mrs. Montague, the famous "blue-stockings," who had sought to vindicate Shakespeare from Voltairian criticism, sat up for a whole night reading it. French influence was then at its height, and Francklin's work may have been suggested by that of Brumoy, whose *Theatre of the Ancients*, published in 1749, included a translation of Sophocles.†

The *Œdipus Tyrannus* was translated by T. Maurice in 1779. In 1788 R. Potter, encouraged by

The prologue asserts that

"Every critic of each learned age

By this just model hath reformed the stage."

† Francklin's *Sophocles* was re-published in Valpy's *Classical Family Treasury* in 1832.

the reception of his Euripides, added to it, at someone's request, a less successful version of Sophocles.

A fresh attempt was made by T. Dale (afterwards the Rector of St. Pancras), and was published by subscription in 1824. It is closer to the Greek than Francklin's, but less poetical.

The poet Campbell was justified in saying in his *Lectures on Poetry*, in 1825, "Not much genius has been wasted on the translation of Sophocles." With a true perception of the nature of the task, he adds, "And yet it might have been wasted."

Since then a complete translation of Sophocles by E. H. Plumptre (who has also translated Æschylus) was published in 1865, and is now in the third edition.

Some years earlier Donaldson's edition of the *Antigone* in 1848 had been accompanied with a verse translation, the hasty production of a good scholar and able man.

Translations into English verse of all the plays, excepting the *Œdipus Coloneus*, have been published for the present writer by Messrs. Blackwood & Sons. Of English prose translations, it is enough to mention that of Adams in 1729, of Clarke in 1790, and one printed at Oxford for Talboys in 1823.

2. Considering the so-called classical tradition which obtained in France from the time of Boileau downwards, we might have expected to find many *French* translations of Sophocles. During the eighteenth century, however, none seem to have been published but those of Brumoy in 1749, of Dupuy in 1762, and of Rochefort in 1788. Since that time little seems to have been done, until in our own generation a true poet, M. Leconte de Lisle, the same who in his tragedy of *Les Erinyes* embodied a graceful version of a great part of the *Oresteia*, has translated the seven plays of Sophocles into elegant prose.

3. In Italy, Sophocles has been several times translated:—in the present century by Felice Bellotti (reprinted in the Barbéra Classical Series), and by Massimiliano Angelelli (Bologna, 1824).

4. German translations of Sophocles are too numerous to be mentioned here in detail. Solger, in 1824, speaks of several as preceding his own, and there have been many since, of which those of Thudichum, Donner, and Hartung are the best known. Of single plays, the *Antigone* has been most frequently translated in Germany—notably by Bockh, with a direct view to representation. Mendelssohn's music was written for Bockh's translation. In most of the German versions the Greek metres are directly imitated, an attempt which is perhaps less chimerical in German than in English.* In the present year, Herr Carl Bruch has published at Breslau *Die Tragödien des Sophocles in den Versmassen der Urschrift ins Deutsch übersetzt*. While thus binding himself as to metrical form, he has used considerable freedom in the mode of expression. If a foreigner may be allowed to judge, the effect is less happy than in a rendering which adopts native metres while keeping more closely to the language of Sophocles:—viz., *Sophocles Antigone deutsch von Theodor Kayser*, Tübingen, 1878. We surely cannot be wrong in thinking that

“*Und Keiner weiss von wannen es erschienen*”

is better than

“*Und dessen Ursprung Keiner weiss und Keiner nennt*” ;

that

“*Ich muss die Liebe theilen, nicht den Hass*”

is better than

“*Mein Leben ist die Liebe, nicht der finstre Hass*” ;

* Solger, who adopts the ancient metres with some reservation, has some interesting remarks on this subject in his *Vorrede*. Arguments against the use of modern metres are stated by Bernhady (*Grundriss*, ii. 2, p. 383).

or that the lines

“ *Wie wenn in dem Meer
Wild brauset der Nord :
Nacht giesst sich entsteigend dem finsternen Schlunde
Weit über die See, schwarz wirbelt der Sand
Empor aus des Meers tiefunterstem Grunde,
Und seufzend stöhnt der flutgeschlagne Strand,*”

come nearer even to the essential rhythm of the original than

“ *Wie wilder Sturm sich heulend walzt
Ueber Meeresnacht dahin,
Die Wogen aufwühlt, dass die dunkle Tiefe gahnt,
Und mit dem Gischt den dunkeln Meersand
Bis zum Himmel sprühend werft,
Bis seine Wuth sich bricht am Felsenufer* ”—

although the latter admits of being scanned according to the Sophoclean scheme.

CHAPTER XVII.

ÆSCHYLUS—SOPHOCLES—EURIPIDES—SHAKESPEARE.

I. ROUGHLY and briefly the three great tragic poets of Athens may be distinguished as theological, human, fanciful; or, in terms of modern art, by saying that, while in Æschylus tragedy is mingled with *oratorio*, and in Euripides with *opera* or *melodrama*, in Sophocles it is purely and simply *dramatic*.

1. Even in the *Orestea*, the parent element of solemn choric song still clings about the magnificent new creation which, like Milton's lion, is "pawing to get free." Even in the *Prometheus*, the imagination ranges from the immediate action to contemplate the wonders of the world through which Io wandered, and the strange vicissitudes through which the human race had passed. The young art comes "trailing clouds of glory" from its mythological and theosophic birth-place, and is still partially enfolded in them. The concentration and the rounded outline of tragedy proper are not yet seen there. Add to this that Æschylus was essentially not tragic poet only, but warrior prophet also, and could never in any age have made the fire of his own spirit wholly subject to artistic motives. He was too profoundly interested in ethical and religious problems, and in the history of his time, to have shared the clear untroubled vision of the facts of life on which the work of Sophocles reposes. Æschylus is greater than Sophocles, but as a tragic artist he is less complete.

Once more, in reading Æschylus we are sensible

of a necessary disproportion between the genius of the poet and the minds of his contemporaries ; nay, between the depth of his own thoughts and the primitive cast of his invention. The audience that looked on with delighted awe, when Oceanus entered riding on a griffin, or were almost beside themselves at the appearance of the chorus of Furies, were not far removed in childlike mobility of imagination from the Athenians of a previous generation, who, to the astonishment of Herodotus, worshipped a tall strapping lass for Athena, and received Pisistratus at her bidding. Yet to these men Æschylus fearlessly imparts his deep enigmatic utterances about the divine attributes. He had a soul, which, like that of the early philosophers, more than sufficed to fill the receptivity of his age. Sophocles also was in advance of his contemporaries, but the impression which his art gives us is that of simple adequacy. He is addressing a refined and cultivated audience, and his utterance is exactly measured by their apprehension.

We can hardly suppose that in forming his own style Sophocles ever worked merely on the basis of the Æschylean drama. Although the name of Æschylus was the greatest of those associated with the Lenæan festival in the first half of the fifth century, it was not the only name, and the art, or rather the worship of Dionysus, was greater than any of its votaries. There was a spirit, an atmosphere, enveloping the poet's youth and feeding his imagination, which could not be altogether referred to the genius of any single man, although Æschylus was even then acknowledged to be its greatest luminary. His greatness, it must be remembered, was not for his contemporaries the solitary, imperial thing which, although shorn of so many rays, it appears to us after twenty-three centuries and more.

2. Euripides has been called "most tragic of poets," and "Euripides the human." Comparisons are apt to be illusory, and I shall not enquire whether both these epithets are not more fitly applicable to

Sophocles. The most exacting critic of Euripides as a dramatic poet must always admit that the splendour, the grace, the melodious sweetness, the pathetic tenderness of particular passages in his dramas are beyond praise. It is more important to remark that for Euripides the age of tragedy was already passing away. The coevals of Sophocles had been contented with a fresh interpretation of the old traditions, which their imagination still accepted as real. But now, though few years had passed, a new spirit had almost suddenly arisen—a spirit that was restless, negative, analytical, disintegrating. Intellectual refinement was changing into scepticism. Everything old was questioned. The Sophists were taking the place of the early philosophers. Socrates was at work, and was regarded as the arch-Sophist of Athens. The deeper bearings of his inquiry were not yet understood. Such influences may give promise of an art of the future, but it is impossible that they should not disturb the harmony of the existing phase of art. Many examples might be drawn from the history of the Renaissance in proof of this.

While the “time-spirit” was thus altering, the Athenians were no longer the same “homogeneous public” that had applauded Æschylus and the earlier plays of Sophocles. Many strangers and *novi homines*, many sojourners or occasional visitors, were mingled amongst the spectators.

The effect of all this upon Euripides is manifest. Mr. Froude and Mr. Browning have credited him with far-reaching intentions. They suppose that he purposely threw discredit on the old divinities, in order to prepare the way for a more firmly grounded faith in an unseen Providence.

“There are no gods, no gods !
Glory to God—who saves Euripides.”

Passages may no doubt be quoted in support of this claim.* But it can hardly be substantiated. The

* See esp. *Troad.* 885 foll.

truth is that the subject-matter of tragedy was no longer in any sense an object of genuine belief, and the poet is accordingly tempted to play with it. To do him justice, he is not thinking of inculcating moral lessons, but of producing theatrical effects. And under the changed conditions, this could no longer be done by the old simple means. Nor could the artist reckon upon that patience in the audience, which waits upon the total effect. Euripides strives to pique the imagination by novel incidents, by striking situations, by sharp transitions, which are apt to dislocate the unity, not to say the harmony or naturalness, of the action. Athenian sophisms are put into the mouths of ancient heroes. The gods appear doubtful even of their own existence. Orestes philosophises about the phenomena of sickness in the acme of his suffering, and remarks (*à propos* of Clytemnestra's Furies) that Menelaus would have done wisely if he had left Helen behind him at Troy. The scenes from common life which are so much praised, and which are the best things in Euripides, are marred with casuistry, and neutralised also by the incongruity of their surroundings.

There would be more plausibility in saying that Euripides upholds a philosophy of pessimism. His work is but little influenced (certainly not consistently) by the faith in a Supreme Righteousness which had been growing with "increasing purpose" in Æschylus and Sophocles; and, this removed, tragedy seems to revert to the wild soil of that gloomy temper described above,* as affording a substratum for the art. In Euripides this tendency is aggravated and embittered; and, if Schopenhauer's ideal of tragedy is the right one, then Euripides is certainly "most tragic."

II. In modern times Sophocles has been much praised, but seldom imitated, and never with success. Even those who were originally emulous of following

him appear to have fallen insensibly into the track of Euripides.

The *Antigone*, as we have seen, was translated into French and Italian before the close of the sixteenth century, and Sophocles was well known to Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, Alfieri, as well as to such critics as Brumoy and La Harpe. From the times when Garnier (1580) and Rotrou (1638) dramatised the fable of the *Antigone*, to the time when Balzac, in airing his youthful tragedy, playfully called himself "Sophocles junior," our poet has had warm friends in France, although his greatness was imperfectly estimated by Voltaire and others, to whom Greek simplicity and English freedom seem to have been equally distasteful. But his indirect influence upon the French (and consequently the Italian) stage was more powerful than his example. Taste was guided by Aristotle's rules, and these were largely based upon the practice of Sophocles. And, so far as *form* is concerned, there can be no doubt, for instance, that of the two specimens of expression contrasted by Hallam,

"Thy genius, that's the spirit that keeps thee, is
Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable,
Where Cæsar's is not ; but near him, thy angel
Becomes a fear, as being o'erpowered,"

and

"Mon génie étonné tremble devant le sien,"

the latter comes nearer to the manner of Sophocles. The contrast thus briefly indicated might be carried to considerable length.

But, if from the *form* of English and French tragedy we turn to the *spirit*, the opposite verdict must be given. For everywhere in Shakespeare, and everywhere in Sophocles, there is that which is often found wanting even in Racine—the unmuffled voice of Nature, the profound and varied knowledge of Man. And though the method and circumstances of their art are so different, the points of approximation and kindred between them are, for this reason, only

the more noticeable. The reader was warned at the outset that in going from Shakespeare to the Greek drama he was entering upon a different sphere of art. And it may have appeared surprising that, after saying this, so many of our illustrations should have been drawn from Shakespeare. But nothing proves more demonstrably that the genius of tragic art is the same under the most different conditions, than that a form of it which began from *Titus Andronicus*, and "*Seneca* read by candlelight," should without more immediate contact have come so near to the spirit of Greek tragedy as the Elizabethan drama does in Shakespeare's greatest works; especially in the adjustment of the various characters to the action and to one another, in the climax of dramatic interest, in subtle preparations and pathetic contrasts. In range and compass Shakespeare is greatly superior. In the "temperance which gives smoothness," in the union of "modesty" with "cunning," he would himself admit that he might have learned something from the Greeks. It is in depth, elevation, and intensity, that he most resembles them. In the heroic, warlike and epic vein of the historic plays he has much in common with Æschylus. In the romantic plays he may often remind us of Euripides. But where his tragic power is most unmingled, there his best work recalls the best of Sophocles.

And, just because the quintessence of dramatic excellence is concentrated in Sophocles and Shakespeare, attention was equally drawn to both by the father of dramatic and other criticism in Germany, where these two names have ever since obtained just honours. It is hard to say whether Shakespeare or Sophocles owes the most to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

In concluding a pleasant task, may I be permitted to express the hope that the view of Sophocles here briefly set forth may not be distasteful to those who have studied him longest and loved him best. The

subject is always new and always old. May those to whom any part of what has been said is new, find on further study that it is not untrue! All individual judgments of a great poet must inevitably be partial and fragmentary.

Errata.

- Page 34, line 4, *for* p 16 *read* p 20
,, 45, footnote, *for* p 62 *read* p 65
,, 53, " *for* p 11 *read* p 15

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